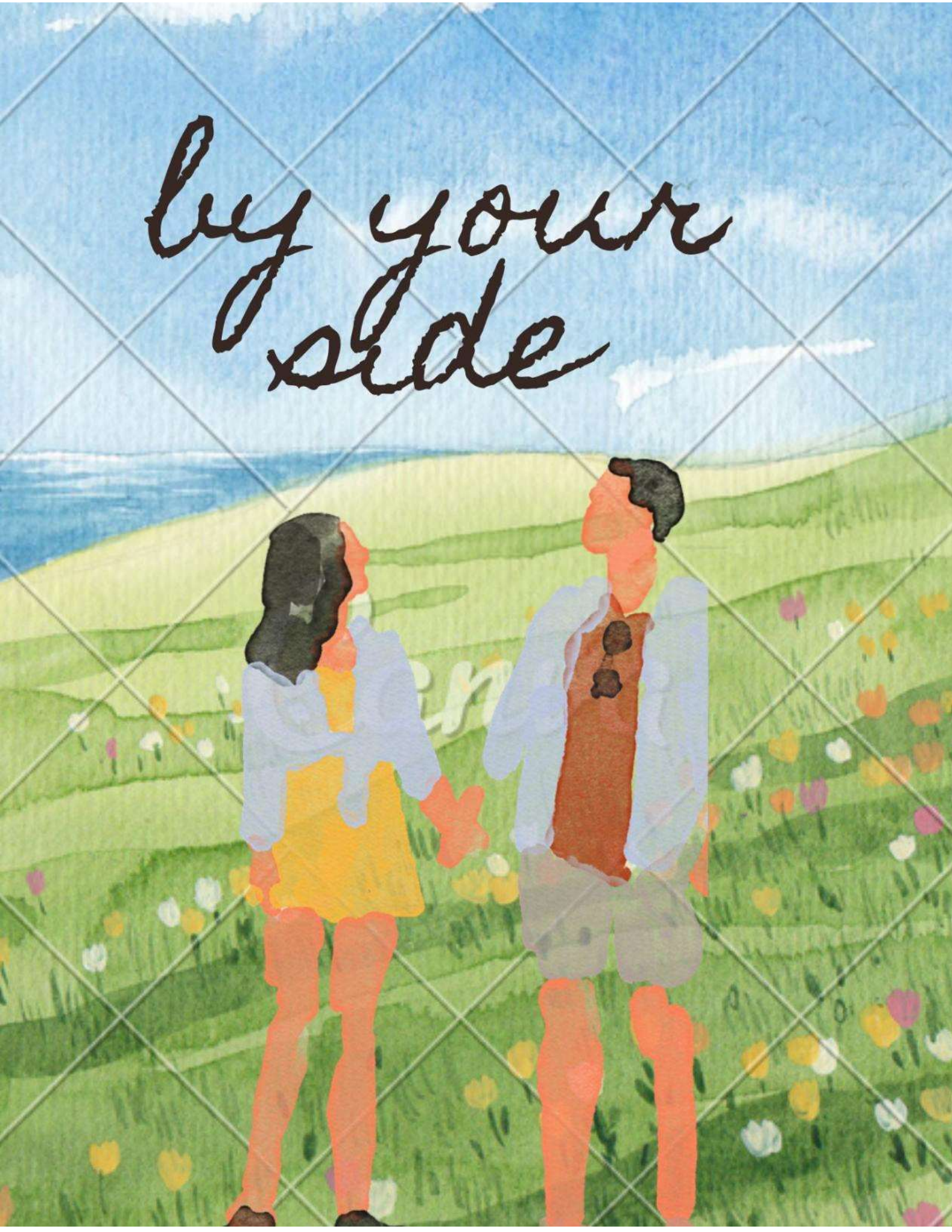
by your side

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Author's Note

Every story begins somewhere—sometimes with a moment, sometimes with a memory. This one begins with Arjun and Ananya, two names that might seem ordinary at first, but carry with them laughter, rivalry, heartbreak, and something more tender than words can explain.

This book is not about perfect people or flawless love. It's about the clumsy, unspoken kind—the feelings you can't admit but can't shake off either. It's about friendships that shape us, rivalries that test us, and the quiet strength we find in unexpected places.

Through Arjun's eyes, you will see the struggles of belonging, of chasing dreams, and of holding onto something fragile when the world keeps trying to pull it away. Through Ananya, you'll see how love often arrives softly—like rain on an ordinary afternoon, unnoticed until it has already changed everything.

I don't promise you a fairytale. But I do promise you honesty.
This story is stitched together with pieces of real life: the late-night conversations, the bus rides, the secrets, the mistakes, and the small moments that stay long after the day is gone.

If you've ever felt unseen, unheard, or unsure of where your heart truly belongs, maybe you'll find a little of yourself here. So turn the page.
The story is waiting. - "Arjun"

Prologue

Some stories don't begin with love—they begin with silence.
With a boy staring out of a window, wondering why his heart beats faster when a certain name lingers in his mind. With a girl, smiling without knowing she's already written into someone else's story.

This isn't a tale of grand gestures or perfect endings.
It's about stolen glances on crowded buses, about laughter that hides secrets, about rivalry, friendship, and the weight of dreams too heavy for young shoulders.

And at its center—Arjun. The boy who wanted nothing more than to belong, yet carried a loneliness he could never explain. The boy who would meet Ananya, not in the middle of fireworks, but in the quiet moments when the world looked the other way.

Love would not come to them easily.
But it would come—and it would change everything.

Dedicated to:-

"For everyone who has ever loved in silence,
and for those
whose hearts still beat for the
words they never said."

Chapter 1 – Strangers in the Rain

The hum of the airplane engines faded as Arjun stepped onto the tarmac, his heart a tangled mix of excitement and anxiety. The monsoon sky hung heavy with clouds, and a fine drizzle had already begun to fall. He adjusted his backpack, glancing around at the bustling airport—everything was unfamiliar: the signs in English, the chatter of people hurrying past, the smell of damp concrete, and the faint petrichor wafting in from the rain outside.

Logan, who had arrived earlier, waved him over with a wide grin. "Welcome to Birmingham! Ready for your first taste of proper English rain?" he joked, brushing a hand through his already damp hair.

Arjun managed a small smile, but the tightness in his chest betrayed him. "Yeah... different from home," he muttered, watching the gray skies press against the glass walls.

The taxi ride from the airport was a blur of wet streets and dripping trees. Arjun pressed his forehead to the window, mesmerized by puddles reflecting the gray sky and the occasional neon sign of a

café. The drizzle tapped rhythmically against the glass. Even the rain smelled different, a cold, metallic scent mingling with wet asphalt, unlike the warm, earthy monsoon back in India.

"It's... strange here," he said quietly, glancing at Logan. "Everything smells... different... even the rain." Logan chuckled softly. "It's just the monsoon, mate. Different rhythm, different vibe. You'll get used to it."

As they drove deeper into the city, Arjun couldn't help but think of home—of the heavy, humid rains in Mumbai, of his mother calling him inside as thunder rumbled, of the smell of wet soil and incense from the street temple. He missed them fiercely.

The taxi turned into narrower streets lined with brick houses, each with small gardens slick with rain. Children ran past with umbrellas, splashing through puddles. Arjun felt a pang of longing; it was beautiful, yet alien.

Soon, the taxi pulled up in front of a red-brick building in Selly Oak. Rain dripped steadily from the eaves as Logan helped Arjun with his luggage. Arjun stepped inside, feeling the strange weight of being somewhere entirely new. The rhythmic drumming of rain against the windows of his room was almost hypnotic.

He pulled out his phone and dialed home almost instinctively.

"Arjun! How are you, beta?" his mother's smiling face appeared on the screen, slightly blurred by the drizzle.

"I'm... okay, Ma," he said, forcing a smile. "The city... it's very different."

"Different, yes," his father chimed in from the background. "But you'll manage. Eat well, dress properly, and don't forget to call us."

"I won't," Arjun said softly, though the lump in his throat betrayed him. "I miss home... I miss you both."

"Oh, beta," his mother said, reaching toward the screen as if she could touch him. "We miss you too. But this is your chance... new place, new life. Make friends, be careful, and enjoy the rain. Remember, even far away, our hearts are with you."

"I'll try, Ma... Dad. I'll try."

The screen flickered as rain splashed outside. Arjun set it down, the warmth of the call lingering, mingling with a wave of homesickness.

A soft knock interrupted his thoughts. He opened the door slowly, and there she was—a girl with damp hair clinging to her face,

holding a bright umbrella, droplets sliding off its edges. Her cheeks were flushed from the rain, and her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

"Hi... I'm Emily," she said, cheerful but hesitant. "I live next door. Thought I'd come by and say hello. The rain's... well, it's kind of nice today, don't you think?" Behind her, a slightly older girl waved shyly. "I'm Maggie," she murmured.

Arjun nodded, managing a small smile. He hadn't expected to meet anyone so soon, especially in a gray, drizzly afternoon.

Emily shifted slightly, brushing raindrops from her umbrella. "You're new here, right? Moving in and all... Must be quite a change from... wherever you're from."

Arjun hesitated. "Yeah... India. It's... very different here."

The brief exchange was nothing more than first greetings, yet it brought a flicker of warmth—a small, unexpected connection in this strange, rainy new world.

Later, he found himself talking to Logan in the living room, sharing impressions of the neighborhood and the weather. "It's... strange," Arjun admitted, staring out at the dripping streets. "Everything feels so different. People, smells, even the rain."

Logan chuckled, leaning back. "You'll get used to it. It's just... different, not bad. Monsoon here is its own thing. Give it a week, and you'll start seeing the charm."

After a while, the urge to explore the neighborhood grew stronger. Donning his jacket and grabbing his umbrella, Arjun stepped out. The air smelled of wet earth and flowers, and each puddle reflected the gray sky above. He wandered slowly, letting the drizzle soak his hair and the rhythm of rain guide his steps.

He passed narrow alleyways, small cafés with steam curling from open doors, and children jumping into puddles, laughing. He paused near a street vendor selling hot tea, inhaling the steam and warmth, and for a moment, the aroma reminded him of chai from roadside stalls back home.

As he turned down a narrow lane, Arjun's attention lingered on the little details—the dripping leaves, the faint scent of wet bricks, the occasional splash of a passing car. Time slipped by, and he realized he had wandered far from his building. Panic pricked at him. He had forgotten the way back.

At the next road crossing, he spotted a man in a raincoat adjusting his umbrella. Summoning courage, Arjun approached.

"Excuse me... um... can you help me? I think I'm lost. Could you tell me where... Selly Oak Residencies are?" he asked, voice tentative.

The man smiled warmly. "Ah, you must be new! I live here too. Follow me; I'll show you the way. Easy to get turned around in this rain."

Relief washed over Arjun as he followed him. Along the way, they exchanged small talk—names, hometowns, the unpredictable monsoon. By the time they reached the familiar red-brick building, Arjun felt a strange sense of comfort. Not only had he found his way back, but he realized that even in this strange land, a friendly face could turn a moment of panic into a small connection.

Back in his room, he shook off the dampness, setting down his umbrella. Rain continued to tap against the windows, a constant reminder that while he was far from home, small moments of warmth—like a stranger's smile or a friendly conversation—could make this place feel a little less alien.

Arjun stared out at the rain-soaked streets, letting the memory of India mingle with this new world. Perhaps, he thought, the monsoon here could feel like home too—if only he gave it time.

As the evening deepened, the rain softened into a gentle drizzle. Arjun sat by his window, the city outside blurred by a mist of water and lights. The streets glistened under the lamplight, reflections dancing on the wet asphalt. He traced the patterns of raindrops racing down the glass, each one carrying a fleeting story of the city.

He thought of his parents, still far away, and the video call replayed softly in his mind—their smiles, their gentle reminders, their faith in him. He missed the familiar chaos of home, the smell of spices drifting from the kitchen, the warmth of his mother's embrace after a long day. But for the first time since he arrived, he also felt a flicker of something else—possibility.

The friendly stranger, the brief chat with Emily and Maggie, the excitement of wandering through the rain-soaked streets... each moment was a tiny thread connecting him to this unfamiliar place. Maybe, he thought, belonging wasn't just about the place itself, but about the people and moments that made it feel alive.

Arjun leaned back, listening to the soft patter of the monsoon outside. The city felt strange, yes—but it wasn't unfriendly. It had a rhythm, a heartbeat of its own. And

somehow, amidst the drizzle, the narrow streets, and the gray skies, he felt the first quiet stirrings of a home he could grow into.

With a small, thoughtful smile, he whispered to himself, "Maybe... this could be my place too."

The rain continued, gentle and persistent, washing over the city like a soft promise of beginnings yet to come. And for Arjun, that was enough—for now.

Chapter 1: Stranger in the Rain; CLOSES.

Chapter 2: Beginning of a New Dawn

The morning sun filtered gently through the thin curtains of the small Birmingham apartment. The air was crisp, tinged with the scent of dew from the nearby park. Logan, always the early riser, slipped quietly out of bed, careful not to wake Arjun who was sprawled under the blanket, his face half-buried in the pillow.

Logan laced up his trainers and stretched at the door. "I'll be back in an hour," he said softly. "I'll make breakfast when I return."

Arjun mumbled something incoherent, too drowsy to respond, and simply rolled over. Logan chuckled under his breath before heading out into the cool morning, the door shutting gently behind him.

Minutes passed before Arjun finally stirred awake. He stretched, rubbed his eyes, and yawned, the silence of the apartment pressing around him. For a moment, he simply sat on the edge of his bed, the thought dawning on him that this was now his new life—far away from home.

Reaching for his phone, Arjun dialed his parents. After two rings, their faces filled the screen, bright and familiar despite the miles

between them. His mother's voice came first, overflowing with warmth:

"Arjun! Finally, you called. We've been waiting to hear from you."

A smile spread across his face as he propped the phone against a stack of books. "Sorry, Maa. Yesterday was tiring. But I'm fine—really."

The call stretched longer than he expected. They asked about the flat, about Logan, about the city streets, and reminded him to eat properly. His father, ever practical, slipped in a few words of encouragement about staying focused in his studies. Though they were worlds apart, Arjun felt the same comfort he always did, like a tether holding him steady.

When the call finally ended, he sat quietly, staring at the phone screen until it dimmed. Only then did he get ready for the day, smoothing down his uniform blazer and carefully combing his hair.

As he stepped into the living room, Mrs. Kamala, the neighbor from across the hall, appeared at the door. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she asked, "Are you... Arjun?"

He nodded politely. "Yes, ma'am. I just moved in."

Her stern expression melted into a smile. "Ah! Logan mentioned you. Welcome, beta. If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

Before Arjun could reply, Logan returned, cheeks flushed from his jog. He clapped Arjun lightly on the back. "Good timing! Let's get breakfast going."

Together, they prepared toast, eggs, and tea, the kitchen filling with the soft rhythm of sizzling and chatter. Logan teased him about being lazy while Arjun defended himself with mock indignation. Despite his nerves about school, the laughter eased him into the morning.

The gates of King Edward's School loomed tall and imposing, a blend of old brick architecture and modern glass expansions. Students streamed in from all directions, their accents lilting in ways that still felt foreign to Arjun.

Inside the classroom, Arjun found himself seated beside Vedant, who gave a relieved grin at the familiar brown face. They exchanged quick introductions, realizing they were from the same country but different states. Almost instantly, the awkwardness of being foreigners lessened.

The first lecture was physics. The teacher, Mr. Davies, scribbled equations across the board, his tone brisk. Most students struggled to keep pace, but Arjun and Vedant instinctively leaned forward, pens flying over their notebooks. They whispered quick solutions to each other, solving problems almost as soon as they were posed.

By the end of the lesson, Mr. Davies raised an eyebrow. "Well, it seems our new students are quite capable. Excellent work, boys."

Arjun felt a flicker of pride, but it was short-lived. When he glanced around, he noticed the sideways glances—the other students whispering, their eyes narrowed with curiosity or silent judgment. Not a single word of congratulations came. In that silence, Arjun felt the weight of being the outsider.

The unease deepened during break when three older boys cornered them in the corridor. They leaned against the lockers with smug grins, blocking the way.

"Well, well. The new geniuses," one sneered. "Think you're better than us, huh?"

Arjun froze, his throat tight, but Vedant spoke cautiously. "We... just answered the questions."

The tallest of the bullies stepped forward, his finger jabbing Vedant's chest. "Don't get too comfortable. This is our turf."

Before things could escalate, another voice cut through. "Oi! Enough."

A boy with sharp features and confident posture stepped between them. His presence alone made the bullies hesitate. "Pick on someone else," he said coolly.

The bullies muttered curses but backed off, disappearing down the corridor.

Arjun let out a shaky breath. The boy turned to them. "You alright? I'm Viren. Don't let those idiots bother you. They bark more than they bite."

Relief washed over Arjun as they shook hands. Viren's smirk softened into a grin, and for the first time that day, Arjun felt like maybe things wouldn't be so bad.

At lunch, they found another ally—Shivansh. The cafeteria buzzed with life, and Arjun and Vedant hesitated at the entrance until Viren waved them over. Beside him sat Shivansh, whose mischievous smile instantly put them at ease.

"New kids, huh?" Shivansh teased. "Heard you two are the reason half the class looked like they swallowed lemons."

That broke the ice, and soon the four of them were laughing, trading stories of favorite foods from back home, the quirks of England, and embarrassing childhood memories. Shivansh's dramatic retelling of his school pranks had them doubled over, while Arjun confessed to once humming through an entire song on stage when he forgot the lyrics.

By the end of lunch, the cafeteria no longer felt hostile. The laughter at their table made it feel, for the first time, like home.

After school, while wandering the streets near their flats, they encountered another Indian student—Raxit. He was quieter than the rest, thoughtful in his words, but he blended easily into their group. They walked together, sharing fragments of their past lives in India, realizing how comforting it was to speak in their mother tongue among friends.

The next day, however, they realized that Raxit wasn't just another student.

It happened in their mathematics class. The moment Mr. Carter stepped in, the classroom filled with the sound of rustling pages and hurried whispers. He was a stern man, his round glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose as he barked out problems in his clipped accent.

"Alright, settle down," he commanded, chalk in hand. "Let's test your basics. Who can solve this?"

He scrawled a long equation across the blackboard, a biquadratic equation, Mr. Carter told them to find out the sum of roots. Most students frowned, some bent over their notebooks hesitantly. Arjun and Vedant straightened in their seats, pens poised—they were ready to tackle it.

But before either of them could finish writing, a voice from the middle row rang out.

"The answer is negative three," Raxit said calmly, his tone confident, almost casual.

Mr. Carter paused, turned, and raised an eyebrow. "Already? Explain your steps."

Without hesitation, Raxit stood. He walked the teacher through each stage of the problem, his voice steady, clear, and unhurried, as

though he'd rehearsed it in his sleep. His logic was airtight, his transitions seamless. When he finished, Mr. Carter gave a rare nod of approval.

"Correct. Excellent work, Raxit. That was... fast."

A murmur spread through the class. Some students leaned back in their chairs, arms folded, annoyance clear on their faces. Others looked at him with quiet admiration.

Arjun felt his jaw slacken slightly. He and Vedant had been halfway through their calculations, yet Raxit had not only beaten them to it but had explained the entire solution flawlessly.

The lesson continued. Every time Mr. Carter posed a question—whether it was algebra, geometry, or a tricky calculus problem—Raxit's hand was the first in the air. His answers weren't rushed guesses; they were detailed, precise, and, more importantly, correct.

By the time the bell rang, the teacher's voice held a tone Arjun had rarely heard directed at a student. "Well done today, Raxit. Keep it up—you're setting the bar high."

As the class packed up, Arjun and Vedant exchanged a glance.

"Did you see that?" Vedant whispered, his voice tinged with disbelief.

Arjun nodded slowly. "I thought we were quick... but he's on another level."

Instead of jealousy, though, he felt something else stirring in his chest. Watching Raxit command the room like that didn't feel discouraging—it felt inspiring, like a challenge waiting to be met.

When they regrouped with Viren and Shivansh after class, the excitement was clear.

"Mate, you were on fire in there," Viren said, clapping Raxit on the shoulder.

Raxit only smiled faintly, almost modestly. "I just like solving problems. That's all."

But to Arjun, it was more than that. For the first time, he realized their little circle wasn't just a band of boys trying to find their place—it had within it someone extraordinary. And rather than envy, it sparked something stronger in him: a determination to push himself harder, to rise to the challenge, and to see how far they could all go together.

A week slipped by in a blur of classes, shared lunches, and evening walks. The five of them—Arjun, Vedant, Viren, Shivansh, and Raxit—were no longer just acquaintances thrown together by

circumstance. They were becoming a unit. They studied side by side, joked over dinners, argued about cricket versus football, and teased one another mercilessly. At night, when the streets outside grew quiet, their conversations stretched late into the hours, bouncing between ambition and silliness, seriousness and laughter.

But everything shifted the following Monday.

That morning, a quiet buzz seemed to hum through the corridors of King Edward's School. Students were whispering in groups, glancing curiously toward the assembly hall. Even the teachers seemed unusually strict about punctuality.

When the boys entered, the grand hall already felt different. Tall windows allowed streaks of pale sunlight to spill over the polished wooden floor, catching on the brass plaques of past achievers mounted proudly along the walls. The sheer size of the room, with its high ceiling and arched beams, amplified the chatter until it felt like a restless tide.

And then, as the headteacher, Mr. Hughes, strode toward the podium, the noise collapsed into silence. He was a man with an air of quiet command—tall, silver-haired, and sharp-eyed behind rimmed

spectacles. Even the most notorious troublemakers straightened in their seats.

His voice, deep and deliberate, carried through the hall without the need for a microphone.

"This year," he began, pausing just long enough for every ear to tune in, "We will be holding the Class Elite Selection Exam for high school students , who had joined the school last week , for the new students who don't know about this class this is a class where all the top performer in their respected grades , So if you are capable and have talent then you are welcome in this class so be prepared for the exam."

The words hung in the air like a challenge.

"This is no ordinary test," he continued, his gaze sweeping over the rows of students. "It is designed to challenge the brightest minds, to push you beyond the limits of ordinary academics."

A low ripple of whispers spread through the hall. Students leaned toward one another, some with excitement flashing in their eyes, others with dread. Arjun could hear fragments of the chatter—"only the best make it," "heard it's impossible," "last year only four students passed..."

Mr. Hughes raised a hand, and the murmurs died instantly.
"Those who qualify will join Class Elite—a group that will be granted access to advanced resources, specialized mentorships, and opportunities that set them apart from their peers. It is a path that can shape your future in ways ordinary schooling cannot."

He let the weight of those words sink in before delivering the final blow.
"The exam will take place one month from now. One month to prepare yourselves. I expect every one of you to give it your best effort—because this test will not only measure knowledge, but also resilience, adaptability."

Silence followed, thick and heavy. The announcement had landed like a stone in water, sending ripples across every student seated there.

Arjun's pulse quickened. His palms grew clammy against his knees. Class Elite... The very name carried an aura of mystery and prestige. He glanced sideways at his friends.

Vedant's jaw was clenched, eyes narrowed in intense focus. He was already strategizing, Arjun could tell. Shivansh, on the other hand, leaned back in his seat with a smirk tugging at his lips, as if daring the exam to come at him. Raxit's face was unreadable, calm as still

water, though his eyes betrayed a sharp glint of interest. Viren sat forward, nodding slightly to himself, already looking determined—as though the decision had been made in his mind the moment the words were spoken.

When the assembly ended, students spilled into the corridors in a wave of restless chatter. Some groaned about the difficulty; others boasted about how easily they'd crush it. But for Arjun and his group, the air between them buzzed with unspoken thoughts until they found a quiet corner near the stairwell to huddle together.

Vedant broke the silence first, his voice low but urgent. "This is it. A chance to prove ourselves. We can't afford to let this slip."

Raxit's lips curved in the faintest of smiles, his tone steady. "A chance to see who's really ready."

Shivansh chuckled, though there was a spark in his eyes. "You make it sound like a battle. But hey, I don't mind a good fight. Might be fun watching the others sweat while we crack it."

Viren crossed his arms, his usual smirk fading into seriousness. "It's more than just fun, Shivansh. If we make it, doors open. Real opportunities. We'd be fools not to try."

Arjun swallowed hard, his heart hammering. For a second, he felt the familiar doubt creep in—was he really capable of standing alongside them? But then he looked around the circle. These weren't just classmates anymore; they were his people. Their determination steadied him, like anchors in rough seas.

"Then we'll give it everything we've got," he said firmly. His voice surprised even himself—it was steady, resolved. But inside, excitement and nerves churned together like a storm.

The five of them stood there for a moment, bound by an invisible thread. None of them said it aloud, but they all felt it: this exam was no longer just about proving themselves individually. It was about proving what they could become—together.

The dawn of a new chapter had begun, and though none of them could yet imagine it, the Class Elite exam would be the spark that lit a fire destined to change their lives forever.

Chapter 2: beginning of a new dawn; Closes

Chapter 3 – Threads of Connection

Arjun balanced a small stack of books in one hand and a half-eaten toast in the other when Emily Clarke appeared on the balcony, Shadow weaving excitedly between her feet.

"Careful there!" she called playfully. "Don't drop those. Shadow and I have a bet that you'll spill something before breakfast."

Arjun laughed nervously, adjusting his grip. "I think I can manage. Shadow won't approve either."

Emily tossed a small ball toward him; Shadow leapt and caught it mid-air. "See? He already likes you," she said with a smirk, brushing her hair behind her ear.

Arjun smiled. "You and Shadow are making it hard to focus."

Emily laughed softly, her eyes lingering on him just a little too long. "He's serious, focused... but there's something about him," she thought.

"Arjun, I'll drive you to school," Logan said, appearing suddenly from the kitchen, keys in hand.

Arjun nodded, grateful. "Thanks, Logan."

The drive to King Edward's was quiet. Logan mostly observed the streets of Selly Oak, while Arjun ran through the day in his mind. The **preliminary exam** loomed large, but he felt ready.

Arriving at school, Arjun joined a small group gathered near the entrance.

"Three hours of pure logic and calculation," Viren muttered, stretching. "I'm not sure I'm ready."

Raxit smiled calmly. "It's not about speed, Viren. Accuracy and planning matter more."

Vedant smirked. "Yeah, but speed helps when the clock is ticking, right?"

Shivansh nodded quietly. "Just focus on what you can control."

Arjun listened, contributing occasionally to clarify tricky points. Despite the chatter, he felt confident; he had prepared and knew how to pace himself.

Exam Begins

The teacher handed out the exam papers, and the clock began its relentless countdown. Silence settled over the classroom like a heavy curtain, pressing on everyone's shoulders. Arjun's heart, however, remained calm. His mind moved through the questions with quiet efficiency.

The first problems were straightforward—logic puzzles, math sequences, analytical reasoning. Arjun's pen moved almost on autopilot, tracing patterns and connections that made the process seem effortless.

Around him, the classroom hummed with tension. Viren slammed his pencil down. "Why is number five so complicated?" he muttered, scowling but determined. Maya scribbled furiously, erasing constantly but refusing to give up. Leo double-checked each step, glancing occasionally at Arjun in awe. Hannah experimented nervously with different approaches, sometimes pausing to peek at others' methods. Ethan and Oliver whispered strategies back and forth, their friendly rivalry a small distraction.

Arjun noticed small mistakes nearby. Without turning his head, he sketched a tiny diagram in the corner of his page and nudged it toward a struggling student. The student's eyes widened briefly before a quiet smile flickered across their face, and they returned to the exam with renewed confidence.

Hours stretched endlessly. Sweat gathered on foreheads, pencils snapped under pressure, and Shadow's barking echoed faintly in Arjun's memory. Yet his rhythm never faltered. Problems that left others hesitating fell into place instinctively. Logical chains linked effortlessly; formulas clicked as if on cue, and sequences unfolded naturally, guiding him smoothly toward the answers.

By the halfway mark, a few students glanced at him, a mixture of curiosity and frustration in their expressions. "Does he even need to breathe?" one whispered. Vedant scribbled furiously, pausing to note Arjun's calm face. This wasn't just raw skill—it was observation, patience, and focus in perfect balance.

Viren let out a long sigh. "I give up on number eight... no, wait—I'll try again," he muttered, shaking his head but pushing forward. Shivansh remained quiet, pen moving in a controlled rhythm. Occasionally, their eyes met, and a subtle nod passed between him

and Arjun—a silent acknowledgment of shared understanding amid the tension.

As the clock ticked down, Arjun mapped out the final tricky question with deliberate calm. Others fumbled, muttered, and panicked, but he finished effortlessly, pen clicking softly against the paper as he set it down.

The teacher collected the papers. A collective exhale filled the room. Students leaned back, rubbing temples, stretching tired limbs. Some glanced at Arjun, curiosity and awe written on their faces. He simply set his pen down, a faint, satisfied smile on his lips.

Walking home, Emily waved from her balcony, Shadow barking happily.

"How was it?" she called.

Arjun shrugged modestly. "Intense... but manageable."

Emily tilted her head, a faint blush warming her cheeks. "You make it look easy," she said softly. "How does he stay so composed?"

That evening, Vedant and Raxit sat quietly, reviewing their notes from the exam.

"I think Arjun handled it too well," Vedant muttered, shaking his head. "It's almost unfair how he balances speed and accuracy."

Raxit nodded thoughtfully. "He's talented, yes, but it's more than that. He notices patterns, helps others quietly... that kind of composure and observation will matter more than raw skill later."

Next Day – Preliminary Results

The following morning, the teacher called the class together. Arjun, Raxit, Vedant, Viren, and Shivansh were highlighted— officially selected yet, but recognized as **top performers** in the preliminary assessment.

"Excellent effort," the teacher said, looking at the five individually. "You have shown strong potential. Continue to support each other and observe your peers. There's more to come."

The classmates exchanged glances. Around Arjun and the others, the first threads of camaraderie and mutual respect began to form. They didn't speak of it yet, but a quiet acknowledgment passed between

them. Each carried their own strength: Arjun's calm intellect, Raxit's disciplined focus, Vedant's wit, Viren's athletic fire, and Shivansh's quiet perception. Together, they were beginning to complement each other in subtle, unspoken ways.

Arjun stepped outside, taking in the crisp morning air of Selly Oak. Emily waved again from her balcony, Shadow bouncing happily beside her. The streets were alive with distant bus engines, chatter from neighbors, and children laughing as they played nearby. Everything was messy, unpredictable, yet vibrant with possibility.

Friendships were forming, small gestures and shared glances laying the groundwork for bonds that would carry them through challenges, victories, and life ahead. Arjun could feel it, a quiet rhythm under the surface, an invisible thread connecting him to the others. Bonds were strengthening, trust being built in subtle ways that no one else could see.

And at the center of it all, calm and observant, Arjun walked through Selly Oak, aware that this was only the beginning. The city, the school, the friends he was slowly discovering—they were all pieces of something larger, something waiting to grow. And he was ready.

Chapter 4 – Crossing paths

Arjun woke up to the soft hum of the morning in Selly Oak. The city was quiet; streets damp from the previous night's rain. He rubbed his eyes, stretched, and moved toward the living room where Logan was already preparing a cup of tea.

"Morning, cousin," Logan said without turning. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah, normal morning," Arjun replied, grabbing a glass of water.

They exchanged light conversation about the usual day—school, errands, and plans for the weekend. Logan's calm presence was comforting, as always.

Arjun switched on the television to check the weather forecast. A stern warning flashed across the screen: **"Thunderstorm expected in Selly Oak today. Avoid unnecessary travel."**

"Hmm... great," Arjun muttered under his breath, grabbing his school bag. The forecast lingered in his mind as he stepped outside, ready for another day.

By the time he reached **Residency Square**, the small library caught his eye. A girl—Emily—was leaning against the entrance, reading a book. She noticed him too, giving a subtle, playful smile.

Arjun stood across from the library entrance, watching Emily as she glanced up from her book. His gaze was met by hers, and he felt a strange warmth, despite the dark clouds above.

Emily tilted her head, smirking. "You know, standing there like that, you look like some tragic hero from a British novel."

Arjun half-smiled. "And you're the narrator, I suppose?"

"Obviously. Someone has to make you sound interesting."

"You mean I'm not already?"

"Not unless you count staring at clouds as a hobby."

"Clouds tell you more than people think."

"Ah, the philosopher speaks again. Should I write this down for your biography?"

"Might be the only book worth reading with my name on it."

"Careful, I'll make you sound too perfect. Then girls might actually line up."

"Not the kind I'd want."

"And what kind do you want?" Emily asked, leaning closer.

"The library's about to open. Shouldn't you be heading in?"

"Dodging questions already. Classic Arjun," Emily teased.

As Arjun lingered near the library, his gaze was drawn to a figure approaching along the wet path. She moved with a quiet grace, her steps measured and confident, the books cradled in her arms like precious treasures. Even beneath the overcast sky and the lingering drizzle, there was something luminous about her presence—as if she carried a little warmth with her, untouched by the gray morning.

Her hair, dark and glossy, clung slightly at the ends from the mist, and the subtle sway with each step seemed almost rhythmic, calming in a way that surprised Arjun. She glanced around occasionally, her brown eyes sharp yet soft, and Arjun realized he was staring, unable to tear his attention away.

Who is she? he thought, a strange flutter in his chest that he didn't understand. He had never seen her before, yet there was a quiet familiarity in the way she moved, like she belonged to some world slightly out of reach but undeniably real.

He shifted slightly, hoping she wouldn't notice him lingering near the library entrance. His mind raced—what could he say if he spoke to her? *"Hi... I'm Arjun"*? No, too normal. Should I just smile? No, that's too awkward.

The girl—Ananya—turned slightly, adjusting the strap of her bag, and Arjun caught a brief glance at her profile. Her lips curved faintly in thought, almost imperceptible, yet it was enough to make his heart skip.

Arjun exhaled slowly, trying to regain composure. *Focus, Arjun. She's just a girl. But... somehow, not just a girl.*

For a moment, time seemed to stretch. The sound of raindrops falling from the eaves, the faint rustle of leaves, even the distant chatter of other students, all faded into the background. She moved past, disappearing into the direction of her own path, leaving Arjun with a lingering curiosity he couldn't shake.

Just as Arjun was collecting his thoughts, Vedant's voice called out from behind, sharp and teasing: "Hey! Arjun! Who's this standing with you?"

Arjun turned, slightly startled, and saw Vedant jogging over with his usual confident grin, eyes scanning the scene. Vedant's presence always carried a kind of energy that was impossible to ignore.

"This is... Emily," Arjun said, motioning toward the girl still leaning casually against the library wall. "Emily, this is Vedant, my friend."

Vedant's eyes widened slightly as he took in Emily's playful stance, her observant eyes, and the way her smile tugged at the corners of her lips. *Well... that's interesting,* Vedant thought, a faint blush rising to his cheeks. He was usually quick to tease, but there was something about Emily that caught him off guard.

Emily, however, seemed entirely unbothered by Vedant's gaze. She focused her attention on Arjun, leaning slightly forward with a grin that suggested she already knew she could push his buttons.

"Ah, so this is the mysterious Arjun everyone talks about?" she said, her tone teasing yet friendly.

Arjun felt his cheeks warm, but managed a small, shy smile. "Mysterious? That's a bit dramatic, don't you think?"

Vedant, meanwhile, tried to regain his composure, leaning casually against the library wall. "Dramatic, yes... but sometimes accurate."

Emily laughed softly, a melodic sound that seemed to echo even in the quiet morning. "We'll see how accurately you find him, Vedant," she said, giving him a knowing glance.

Vedant's grin widened. *She's clever... I like that,* he thought, impressed by her confidence and playful energy.

Arjun, feeling slightly protective yet embarrassed, cleared his throat. "Vedant, don't scare her with your... uh... charm," he said quietly.

Vedant chuckled, waving a hand. "Relax, Arjun. I only bring attention where it's interesting."

The moment stretched as the three stood there, the gray morning light filtering softly through the clouds, punctuated by the distant hum of the city awakening. Even though they had just met, the dynamics were clear: Emily was sharp and playful, Arjun observant and cautious, and Vedant, ever the teaser, intrigued by the new energy she brought.

Arjun realized he had to focus, though. Emily's attention on him made him unusually aware of his surroundings—the slick pavement

beneath his shoes, the slight chill in the air, even the sound of Shadow barking faintly somewhere in the distance.

Interesting people, he mused quietly. I suppose Vedant isn't wrong.Arjun and Vedant left Emily behind, who was now playing with Shadow, laughing as the small dog leapt around her feet. The soft patter of raindrops on the pavement created a rhythmic backdrop as the two friends started walking toward school, umbrellas tucked under their arms.

Vedant broke the silence first, his voice quieter than usual, as if weighing the question carefully. "So... what do you think of her?"

Arjun glanced at him, catching the subtle change in Vedant's posture—the slight lean forward, the spark in his eyes. It was unlike his usual teasing demeanor. He smiled softly, amused by his friend's sudden seriousness.

"I don't know," Arjun replied thoughtfully. "She's... different. Confident, sharp... playful. And there's something in the way she carries herself—calm, yet lively. You can't ignore it."

Vedant nodded slowly, as if processing the observation. "Yeah... I noticed that too. She has this... presence. Makes you want to pay attention, you know?"

Arjun chuckled softly. "Presence, huh? That's one way to put it. I didn't even get a chance to talk properly, but... there's something about her. I can't stop thinking about how natural she is, the way she interacts with the dog, her smile. Even when I'm not looking, it feels like she leaves a mark."

Vedant smirked, trying to lighten the mood, though his tone was still curious. "Sounds like someone's impressed. Or distracted."

"Maybe both," Arjun admitted, shaking his head slightly. "I just... I don't know how to approach her yet. And I don't want to mess it up. She seems... careful with people."

Vedant chuckled knowingly. "Careful, huh? Good. That means she's smart. Smart people are the hardest to reach, but the ones worth knowing."

Arjun glanced at him, surprised by the insight. "I suppose you're right... but it's tricky, isn't it? Not knowing whether to just... observe or actually say something."

Vedant shrugged. "Observation is a start. Pay attention, and the right moment will come. That's what I always do."

The first heavy drops of rain fell, splashing off the pavement and pattering on their shoulders. Arjun and Vedant quickened their pace,

laughing as they dodged puddles and ducked under trees for temporary cover.

The rhythm of the rain seemed to mirror their conversation—slightly chaotic, yet refreshing. Vedant's arm brushed against Arjun's, and for a moment, Arjun felt the thrill of the unpredictability—the storm outside, the uncertainty of their feelings, and the anticipation of what—or who—was waiting just ahead.

"Race you to the corner?" Vedant called, breaking into a sudden sprint toward the streetlight.

Arjun laughed, shaking his head, and ran after him, the rain soaking through their jackets. At that moment, the morning seemed alive—the city buzzing faintly around them, droplets shimmering like tiny diamonds on the pavement, and a strange, exhilarating sense that today, something new had already begun.

Arjun and Vedant ducked into the small neighborhood supermarket, shaking off the rain as they entered. The warmth inside was immediate, carrying the faint scent of fresh bread and damp produce. Shelves lined the walls, stacked neatly with groceries, cans,

and bottles, while a few locals moved slowly, picking up their morning essentials.

Vedant shook his head, flicking a few droplets of rain from his hair. "Ugh... finally. I was starting to feel like a drowned rat out there," he muttered, tossing his bag onto the counter by the door.

Arjun chuckled softly, glancing around the store. He was still preoccupied with the thought of Emily outside and the fleeting image of Ananya from earlier. Then, as he moved down an aisle to pick up a pack of bottled water, he accidentally bumped into a girl.

"Oh! Sorry!" he exclaimed, stepping back quickly.

The girl turned toward him, her dark hair tucked neatly behind her ears, sharp brown eyes assessing him for a moment before softening. "It's fine," she replied calmly, her voice precise and composed. "I wasn't watching where I was going either."

Arjun felt a jolt of recognition—or maybe curiosity. She seems... precise, deliberate. "You—uh, you go to the school near here, right?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

The girl raised an eyebrow slightly but didn't seem offended. "Yes, I do. And you?"

"Yeah... same," Arjun replied, feeling a bit clumsy. He noted the way she carried herself: confident, calm, and independent. It was difficult not to be impressed.

Vedant, standing a few feet away, nudged him quietly. "Go on, ask her something. Don't just stare."

Arjun cleared his throat. "Do you... come here often?" he asked awkwardly, forcing a small smile.

The girl's lips curved faintly in amusement. "Fairly often. It's the only nearby store that hasn't run out of proper bread yet."

Vedant snorted softly behind him. "Proper bread, huh? You've got standards, I like that."

The girl glanced at Vedant briefly, her expression neutral. "And you are...?"

"Vedant. I tend to appear at inopportune moments," Vedant said with a grin.

She tilted her head slightly, clearly unamused but entertained enough to let the comment pass. "Noted."

Arjun felt the conversation stretch comfortably, a small tension easing between the three. He noticed the way she moved—fluid yet

deliberate, scanning shelves with quiet confidence. Something about her calm presence grounded him in the middle of the storm outside, both literally and metaphorically.

A sudden louder splash of rain against the glass doors made all three glance up. The storm had picked up again, drenching the streets and sending puddles tumbling along the pavement.

"I should get going before it gets worse," the girl said, grabbing a small basket of groceries. "See you around, maybe."

Arjun watched her leave, the rhythmic tap of her shoes against the wet pavement fading. He didn't move immediately, still processing the encounter.

Vedant nudged him again. "You're staring again. Classic."

Arjun chuckled, shaking his head. "She's... interesting. Calm, smart, precise. Hard to ignore."

Vedant smirked knowingly. "Interesting people. That's what I always say. You're catching on."

Arjun glanced at Vedant and then back at the door through which she had exited. Interesting... yes. But who is she? he wondered,

feeling the faint stirrings of curiosity and intrigue he couldn't yet name.

The two friends gathered their items and left the supermarket, stepping back into the drizzle. The air was fresh, almost electric after the storm, carrying with it a sense of anticipation. They hurried down the street, their conversation light but underscored with reflection.

Arjun's phone buzzed in his pocket, making him glance down. He saw Viren's name flashing on the screen. With a soft chuckle, he tapped to answer, careful not to drop the small basket of groceries he was carrying.

"Hey, Viren," he said, glancing at Vedant, who raised an eyebrow curiously.

"Arjun! Big news!" Viren's voice came through, loud enough to echo slightly against the store's tiled walls. "Today's a holiday! No classes, no exams—nothing! Thought I'd give you a heads-up. You free to hang out later?"

Arjun's lips curved into a grin. "A holiday? That's... a nice surprise. Thanks for letting me know."

Vedant, pretending not to eavesdrop but clearly intrigued, leaned over and whispered, "So, what's happening?"

Arjun lowered his voice, though the store was fairly empty. "Holiday. Looks like you're staying with me today."

Vedant's face lit up instantly, and he leaned casually against the edge of a shelf. "Staying here? Now that's the news I like! Rain outside, no school... this could be fun."

Arjun chuckled softly. "Fun, huh? Don't get too comfortable. Logan might have other plans for us once we get home."

Vedant groaned dramatically, leaning against the shelf. "Ah, Logan—the ever-watchful guardian. I'll survive somehow... maybe even learn patience today."

Arjun laughed quietly, shifting the basket in his hands. "Or get lectured. Either way, it's going to be... interesting."

Vedant smirked, eyes glinting with mischief. "Interesting is exactly what I like. Don't tell me you're not secretly excited too."

Arjun paused for a moment, thinking about the rainy morning, Emily at the library, and the supermarket aisle they were now standing in. The thought of a day without the usual schedule, just him and

Vedant, sounded unexpectedly appealing. "Alright," he admitted, smiling, "I suppose it could be interesting."

Vedant clapped him lightly on the shoulder, grinning. "That's the spirit. Now, let's finish grabbing our groceries before the rain turns worse and Logan starts fuming."

Arjun shook his head, laughing quietly. Even amid the hum of the fluorescent lights and the faint scent of fresh produce, there was a sense of anticipation. The day was just beginning, and the storm outside only made it feel more alive.

Back home, Arjun and Vedant burst into his room with the energy of two teenagers unleashed from a long stormy morning. Arjun tossed his bag onto the bed, while Vedant nudged a chair slightly out of place. Laughter bubbled between them as they casually kicked a few papers, half-jokingly mimicking the chaos of childhood.

Logan, standing in the doorway, crossed his arms and frowned, his usual calm replaced with mild irritation. "Guys, do you have to act like children every time you come home?" he scolded, his deep voice cutting through their laughter.

Vedant, unbothered, leaned casually against the wall, a sly grin on his face. "Honestly, Logan... don't you think the girls around here are... fascinating? Beautiful, confident, interesting. Don't you notice?"

Logan arched an eyebrow, his frown deepening. "Fascinating? You sound like a gossiping schoolboy. And no—I don't notice because it's not my concern. You two are acting like children, nothing more."

Vedant tilted his head, stepping closer, his tone playful but teasing. "Children? Come on, Logan. You can't seriously tell me that noticing beauty or personality is childish. That's part of being alive!"

Logan shook his head, exasperated. "It's about respect, Vedant. You can observe all you want, but that doesn't give you the right to ogle or behave irresponsibly. That's childish."

Arjun shifted awkwardly, caught between amusement and embarrassment. "Vedant... maybe calm it down a little," he murmured, trying not to laugh.

Vedant smirked at him. "Relax, Arjun. I'm just stating a fact. Logan's just a bit too serious sometimes."

Logan pointed a finger at Vedant. "Too serious? Perhaps. But someone has to balance your recklessness. You think the world

revolves around appearances? No. There are responsibilities, awareness, and—"

"Responsibilities, yes, yes," Vedant interrupted smoothly. "But we can't ignore life's colors while we're at it. You think noticing someone attractive, or interesting... somehow diminishes intelligence or maturity?"

Logan paused, narrowing his eyes, sensing Vedant's sharp wit. "It diminishes focus if that's all you do. You can admire, but keep your priorities straight. There's a difference."

Vedant grinned. "Fair enough, but I'd say appreciating life makes it richer. Even if we're not perfect like you."

Logan shook his head, muttering under his breath but smiling faintly, realizing he was losing the verbal duel. Arjun chuckled quietly, glad the tension had softened.

Just then, the doorbell rang, cutting through the room's energy. Vedant raised an eyebrow, and Arjun jogged to the door. Opening it, he saw his uncle standing there, briefcase in hand, umbrella dripping from the rain outside.

"Uncle!" Arjun greeted, stepping aside to let him in.

They settled in the living room, and Arjun's uncle spoke warmly about his school, checking if everything was going smoothly. "If there's ever a problem that Logan or Mrs. Kamala can't solve, Arjun, you can come to me. Don't hesitate," he said, reassuringly.

Arjun nodded, listening carefully, grateful for the support. But as his uncle continued speaking, Arjun caught a single detail—a name—Ananya. It was mentioned in passing, unclear and vague. He tilted his head slightly, wondering why a girl's name came up, but chose not to dwell on it. Probably someone from school... nothing important, he thought, and let it slip from his mind.

Meanwhile, Logan and his uncle conversed quietly about household matters. Logan's usual stern tone softened in respect, but Arjun couldn't help hearing snippets of the discussion, his curiosity piqued for only a moment before returning to the warmth and chatter of home.

The rain outside continued to tap gently against the windows, and for Arjun, the combination of Vedant's teasing, Logan's watchful presence, and his uncle's reassuring words made the house feel alive, chaotic, and strangely comforting all at once.

Later that afternoon, the rain had eased into a gentle drizzle, and the room carried a cozy, quiet warmth. Arjun and Vedant were sitting near the window, each nursing a cup of tea, watching droplets slide down the glass. The soft hum of the refrigerator and the occasional chirp of birds outside created a calm, reflective atmosphere.

After a long pause, Arjun finally spoke, his voice low and hesitant. "Vedant... can I ask you something?"

Vedant looked up, curiosity flickering in his eyes. "Of course. What's on your mind?"

Arjun took a deep breath, swirling the tea in his cup. "It's about Emily... I mean, what I feel. I don't know if it's just a crush or something more, but... seeing her today, I realized I care more than I thought."

Vedant's expression softened. "Ah... I see. That's... normal, Arjun. Feelings like that—they catch you off guard, especially when you least expect them."

Arjun looked down at his hands, fiddling with the rim of the cup. "It's strange, though. I feel a connection, but I also don't want to

make things awkward. I'm not sure how to approach it—or even if I should."

Vedant leaned back, thoughtful. "The key is honesty, not just with her, but with yourself first. You have to understand what you want, what you're ready for... otherwise, it'll always feel uncertain."

Arjun nodded slowly, taking in the advice. Then, after a quiet moment, he let out a small sigh. "There's something else I've been thinking about... my future. I want to go to MIT."

Vedant's eyes widened slightly, the familiar spark of ambition lighting up his gaze. "MIT? Really? That's exactly what I've been aiming for as well. I've dreamed of joining for years. I never thought I'd meet someone else with the same goal."

Arjun's lips curved into a small smile. "It's... reassuring, actually. Knowing someone else wants the same, understands the drive. Sometimes it feels like I'm chasing it alone."

Vedant leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You're not alone, Arjun. We all have dreams, ambitions... fears too. But having someone to share that with, someone who pushes you and understands, makes it less... lonely."

The two of them sat in a companionable silence for a moment, the sound of the rain outside echoing softly against the windowpane. Arjun's mind drifted to the conversations they had shared in the past, the laughter, the playful arguments, and now this rare, sincere conversation about their deepest aspirations.

"I want to specialize in AI," Arjun finally admitted, voice barely above a whisper. "I want to create something that can... really make a difference."

Vedant's eyes gleamed with excitement. "That's amazing. I've been thinking about renewable energy... and maybe combining it with AI someday. If we both work hard, maybe MIT is just the beginning."

Arjun nodded, a sense of purpose settling over him. "Yeah... together, we can push each other, make sure we don't lose focus."

Vedant grinned, a spark of mischief still hiding behind the seriousness. "Exactly. Partners in ambition. But promise me one thing—you won't let the distractions of life get in the way."

Arjun laughed softly. "Promise. And you?"

"Promise," Vedant replied firmly, the two of them sealing an unspoken pact.

As the rain continued to patter gently outside, the room felt smaller and warmer—a cocoon of friendship, trust, and shared dreams. In that quiet afternoon, Arjun realized that ambition wasn't just about goals or success—it was about the people who walked alongside you, challenging, supporting, and inspiring you.

And for the first time in a while, he felt... ready.

The drizzle had lightened into a misty rain as Arjun left the house with Vedant, carrying a small basket of groceries Logan had requested. The streets were slick and glistened under the soft glow of streetlights. The air smelled faintly of wet earth and fresh bread from the nearby stores.

As they walked, Arjun noticed a familiar figure just ahead—the girl from the library earlier, Ananya. She moved with an effortless grace, balancing a few shopping bags in her arms. Something about the way she held herself—calm yet deliberate, aware yet unhurried—drew his gaze instantly.

How do I even start a conversation? Arjun thought, quickening his pace slightly to keep a safe distance, careful not to appear too obvious.

Vedant noticed him staring but said nothing, content to let his friend wrestle with the situation. Arjun ducked slightly behind a lamppost, watching as Ananya entered a small grocery store tucked into the corner of the square.

Inside, Arjun followed discreetly, keeping his basket low and trying to appear casual. The store was warm, filled with the aroma of fresh produce, bread, and the faint tang of rain dripping from shoes at the entrance. A few locals moved quietly between the aisles.

Arjun observed Ananya selecting items methodically, her eyes scanning labels, her hands moving with precision. He couldn't help but admire her focus.

Then, through the aisle near the dairy section, another girl appeared—shorter, confident, and precise in her movements—Ishita. Arjun immediately recognized her from earlier mentions. She greeted Ananya with a soft, quick smile, and they began walking together toward the store exit, chatting quietly.

Arjun followed at a safe distance, curious yet hesitant. As they stepped outside, the mist had thickened slightly, and the wet pavement made careful navigation necessary. Suddenly, Ananya slipped on a slick patch of water.

Without thinking, Logan appeared beside them, steadying her and helping pick up the scattered groceries. Ishita glanced at him, her expression calm and precise, offering only a simple, "Thank you," before continuing with Ananya. There was no lingering attachment—her focus was solely on the task at hand.

Arjun, hiding behind a small column, watched the interaction with fascination. Logan's composed, protective presence contrasted sharply with his own nervous, hesitant approach. He felt a mixture of admiration and slight embarrassment.

"Arjun!" Logan's deep voice called suddenly. Arjun jumped slightly, realizing Logan had seen him lurking nearby.

"Yes, cousin?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"Come here," Logan commanded with a faint grin. "Are you going to observe or actually do something? You and Vedant both have the same problem—always noticing beauty instead of acting."

Vedant chuckled, leaning against the railing beside Arjun. "What can I say? Appreciation of beauty is human nature."

Logan shook his head, feigning exasperation. "Human nature, sure. But don't let it distract you from... well, reality. Responsibilities, awareness, the fact that people slip in puddles and you have to help."

Arjun laughed quietly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Noted. But still, she's... intriguing. I can't explain it."

Vedant smirked. "You're hopeless. Just like me."

Logan, ignoring Vedant, shook his head and gestured toward the store. "Come on. Let's finish the shopping before the rain picks up again."

Inside, the store had become lively with locals taking shelter from the rain. Arjun and Vedant moved alongside Logan, the three of them maneuvering through aisles. Arjun's eyes kept flicking toward the door, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ananya or Ishita.

On the way back to the residency complex, they passed the girls again. Ananya and Ishita entered the same building where Arjun lived. He hesitated for a moment, then followed, careful not to be too obvious. Vedant noticed but said nothing, amused by his friend's cautious curiosity.

Inside the lobby, Logan kept a steady pace, subtly ensuring Arjun stayed out of trouble. Ishita passed by, precise in her movements, indifferent to the attention. Arjun finally approached Ananya, though a respectful distance away. She glanced at him briefly, then

returned her focus to her steps, leaving him to wonder how to begin a conversation without seeming intrusive.

The sound of their shoes echoing on the polished floors, the faint scent of wet umbrellas, and the muted chatter of neighbors created a strangely intimate atmosphere. Logan glanced at Arjun, raising an eyebrow with a knowing smirk.

"So," Logan said quietly, "you're like Vedant too—constantly noticing beauty and overthinking everything."

Arjun's cheeks warmed, and he looked down, muttering, "Maybe a little."

Vedant laughed quietly from behind, leaning against the wall. "A little? Classic Arjun."

Logan shook his head, though a small smile appeared at the corner of his lips. "Just remember—there's more to people than appearances. Observation is fine, but action... that's what matters."

As they reached the apartment, the rain had slowed to a drizzle. Arjun carried the groceries inside, and the three settled for dinner. The conversation turned light, filled with Vedant's teasing and Logan's playful admonishments.

Later, as Arjun sat quietly in his room, the sounds of rain still tapping gently against the windows, his thoughts returned to Ananya. The way she moved, the way she interacted with Ishita, and the brief, fleeting moments he had observed left a subtle but persistent impression. His mind wandered, replaying the events of the day, reflecting on Vedant's advice and Logan's words.

It was a day of small encounters, of subtle lessons, and of emotions that Arjun could neither name nor control entirely. And as the night settled, he realized that this day—ordinary in its own way—had already planted seeds that would shape the days to come.

Chapter 5 – Shadows on the Streets

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Three months had passed since Arjun had arrived in Birmingham, and one month since Ananya had stepped into his life. Yet she lingered in his thoughts constantly—whether he saw her in the library, in the corridor, or catching a glimpse on the street.

Every day... I look for her. Every day, I hope to see her smile. And still, she doesn't know what she means to me...

It was Sunday evening, and the streets were unusually quiet. The afternoon rain had left slick patches on the pavement, reflecting the soft orange glow of streetlamps. Shops had pulled down their shutters, and a few pedestrians hurried home, umbrellas in hand. Arjun walked slowly, hands in his hoodie pockets, thoughts swirling like the mist rising from the asphalt.

A sudden sharp laughter cut through the calm.

Arjun's eyes narrowed.

At the corner, Ananya was pressed against the wall of a closed boutique, four local boys surrounding her. Their voices were harsh and mocking, cutting into the quiet night.

"Don't be shy now," one taunted. "We're just having fun. What's with the stiff face, eh?"

Another mimicked her accent cruelly. "I'm not from here... I don't talk like you..." The others laughed cruelly.

Arjun's fists clenched. Without thinking, he stepped forward.

"Back off," he said, his voice calm but firm.

The boys turned, grins widening.

"And who are you? Her bodyguard?" one jeered.

"I said leave her alone."

The first punch came before he could say more. Adrenaline snapped through his body. He ducked, countered, and landed a solid hit to one boy's jaw. He stumbled back, clutching his face.

That was all it took. The fight erupted.

Vedant, who had been walking a few steps behind, shouted, "Arjun!" and leapt into the fray. Two against four—but the odds were still heavy. Vedant threw punches wildly, only to be shoved against a lamppost. Arjun blocked and countered, landing a knee to one

attacker's stomach, flipping another onto the wet pavement. Pain ripped through his ribs as a kick landed squarely.

Ananya's voice cut through the chaos. "Stop it! Please!"

The boys laughed, circling them like predators.

"Oi!"

The shout cut sharp. Logan stepped into the dim street, his stance calm, eyes blazing. Ishita was just behind him, rushing to pull Ananya out of the corner.

Logan didn't hesitate. One boy lunged at him—he flipped him hard onto the pavement. Another tried to swing, only to be caught, locked, and dropped with ease.

The last two froze, panic overtaking their bravado. They bolted into the dark streets.

Vedant, panting, looked at Arjun. "So it's true... Logan really is a national-level MMA fighter."

Arjun, blood trickling from his lip, managed a grin. "Remind me never to spar with him."

Silence fell. Arjun staggered, clutching his ribs. Ishita knelt beside him. "You're hurt," she said softly.

"I'm fine," he lied.

Logan offered his hand, pulling him upright. "Next time, don't be stupid. And at least Birmingham's getting more Indian residents now—it might help you feel a bit more at home."

Arjun's attention shifted across the street. A moving truck sat under a flickering streetlamp. A tall young man leaned casually against it, arms folded, observing everything with a calm, unreadable expression.

Their eyes met briefly.

Nothing hostile, nothing overt. Yet Arjun felt an unease he couldn't shake. The man tilted his head slightly, smiled faintly, and turned back to the movers.

"Karthik," Logan said casually. "New tenant. Moved in today. Helped him carry some boxes earlier—seems like a decent guy."

Arjun nodded, uneasy. Something about that look lingered in his mind

The sun had set fully, and the streets were quiet. Streetlights cast a soft glow over the courtyard, the hum of distant traffic echoing

faintly. Logan sat on the low wall outside the building, hands loosely bandaged, staring at his knuckles.

"You're not a hero," a voice called softly.

Logan turned. Ishita stood nearby, arms folded, her expression firm.

"You could have been hurt... badly," she said. "And I don't want to see that happen."

Logan smirked faintly. "Someone had to step in. Arjun couldn't handle it alone."

"That's not the point," Ishita pressed. "You act like you're untouchable, but one mistake... one misstep—and it could've been you lying there."

"I've handled worse," Logan said quietly.

"Because you're used to it doesn't make it okay," Ishita countered. "You think people admire you for fighting, but most of us just worry. Arjun worries. I do too."

Logan's eyes softened. "You worry about me?"

Ishita looked away. "Someone has to. You hide behind that grin, but I know you care more than you let on."

Silence fell. Logan exhaled. "You make it sound like I'm reckless for fun. I just... don't like seeing people I care about get hurt."

"And yet," Ishita said softly, "you keep putting yourself in danger."

They sat in silence, the faint hum of the city around them.

Finally, Logan chuckled quietly. "You always cut right through me, Ishita."

She smiled faintly. "Someone has to."

She stood. "Be careful next time. Not every fight is worth it."

Logan watched her leave, muttering under his breath, "Guess I'll try... for her."

Late-Night Meeting

Back at the residency, Vedant called Viren, explaining the fight in a rush of adrenaline. Ten minutes later, the door banged open.

Viren stormed in, Shivansh and Raxit following. Eyes scanned the room—bruises, blood, tension.

"What were you thinking? Four against two?" Viren's voice trembled with anger.

"They had Ananya cornered," Arjun said quietly.

Vedant added, "Logan came in—otherwise..."

Viren's fists clenched. "If this escalates, it won't stop here. Recklessness isn't a strategy!"

Shivansh spoke calmly, "Then we step in together. All of us. Next time."

The weight of his words sank in.

Logan leaned against the wall. "You did what you had to. But discipline matters more than spirit. Don't rely on me every time."

Arjun shifted uncomfortably, thinking of Karthik across the street.

"Seems normal," Logan added casually. "Karthik. New tenant. Moved in today. Indian, like us. Friendly enough."

Unease lingered in Arjun's chest.

Viren's gaze sharpened. "Whatever happens, we need a plan. No one gets caught off guard."

For the first time, the Elite 5 weren't just friends—they were a unit. Birmingham had changed, and the shadows of the city were beginning to test them in ways they hadn't imagined.

And the presence of the new resident—the calm, observant Karthik—was an unspoken question mark hanging over all of them.

A sharp knock on the door interrupted the tense discussion in the common room. The sudden sound made everyone glance up, their voices fading into quiet murmurs. Arjun, still nursing his bruised ribs and lip, stood and walked toward the door, brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead.

When he opened it, he was met with the sight of **Ananya** standing there. Her cheeks were flushed—not just from the chill of the evening, but from a mixture of nervousness and determination. Her coat was zipped tightly up to her chin, and her hands were tucked inside the pockets. For a moment, she looked hesitant, like she was weighing whether to step forward or retreat.

Arjun blinked, unsure what to say. "Ananya..." his voice barely carried above a whisper, and he felt his chest tighten unexpectedly.

Before he could stammer further, **Logan** stepped forward, arms open slightly in a welcoming gesture, a small amused smile on his face. "Come in, you're just in time," he said warmly, guiding her into the room. There was an easy authority in his tone that instantly eased some of the tension.

Ananya hesitated for only a second before stepping fully inside. The soft light from the overhead lamp reflected off her hair and gave her a gentle glow. She looked around at the group of boys—Vedant, Viren, Shivansh, Raxit—and gave a polite, shy nod. Logan gestured toward them, "Everyone, this is Ananya. She's... part of our little chaotic story now."

One by one, Arjun introduced the Elite 5 members. "Vedant, Viren, Shivansh, Raxit," he said, each name carrying a hint of pride in the group they had formed. Ananya offered a polite "hello" to each of them, her gaze flickering briefly to Arjun each time, betraying a hint of curiosity and gratitude.

Raxit, ever the observer, noticed something that made him narrow his eyes slightly. Arjun, normally composed, calm, and collected, seemed unsettled. His posture was a little too stiff, his gaze slightly distracted, and his usual controlled breathing seemed a touch shallow. Raxit tilted his head, smirking to himself. *This isn't like him... interesting.*

He gestured subtly toward the balcony. "Come out for a sec," he said quietly, his tone casual but insistent. Arjun hesitated, then followed, leaving the warmth and chatter of the common room behind.

Outside, the cool night air wrapped around them, carrying the faint sounds of distant traffic and the occasional bark of a dog. Arjun exhaled deeply, running a hand through his hair. "She... she wanted to explain herself," he admitted quietly. "Apologize for the trouble today."

Raxit leaned casually against the railing, arms folded, watching him with a knowing grin. "Ah, so that's why you're all jittery," he said, his voice light but teasing. "I get it now. The street fight, the nerves, all of it... makes sense."

Arjun let out a small, embarrassed laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's... just a bit awkward, okay?"

Before Raxit could respond, another knock echoed through the apartment. The door opened to reveal **Emily**, stepping inside with her usual bright energy. She didn't hesitate to glance around the room and immediately zeroed in on Arjun's bruises and scratches. Her eyes widened slightly as she took in the state of his face and arms. "Whoa... what happened to you?" she asked, concern evident in her tone. She stepped closer, inspecting his wounds with a mix of worry and curiosity, gently touching his arm to check the swelling.

Raxit, standing on the balcony, observed the interaction silently and noticed Vedant's unusual reaction. Vedant's shoulders stiffened ever so slightly, and his gaze flickered between Emily and Arjun. There was a subtle mirroring of expressions—the same tension, the same micro-gestures. Raxit's lips curved into a sly grin. Interesting... Arjun and Vedant? They're practically mirror images in how they react. Twins in temperament, if not in looks.

Meanwhile, Arjun tried to mask his discomfort, adjusting his hoodie nervously and giving a small, awkward smile to Emily. Vedant cleared his throat, shifting slightly, his reaction betraying more than he intended. Raxit leaned on the railing, eyes sparkling with quiet amusement as he filed away the little details of the night, noting the strange symmetry between his friends.

The room hummed with soft chatter, nervous energy, and the faint thrill of unexpected company. Outside, the night was calm, but inside, hearts raced, laughter threatened to spill, and the threads of new connections—and subtle tensions—were quietly weaving themselves into the fabric of the evening.

Later, Logan clapped his hands together with mock solemnity, his grin spreading across his face. "Alright, everyone, listen up! Midnight dinner, people. And yes, I am your head chef for the evening. Obey my

rules, or face eternal kitchen shame," he declared, his tone a mix of seriousness and theatrical flair. The announcement drew a collective groan from the boys and a few giggles from the girls, though none of them could hide the sparkle of excitement in their eyes.

The kitchen immediately transformed into a flurry of activity. Ishita grabbed a cutting board and began organizing vegetables with brisk efficiency, teasing Ananya every time her knife trembled slightly. "Careful now! That's not a butter knife," Ishita said, eyebrows raised, though her tone held amusement. Ananya's cheeks flushed pink as she laughed nervously, trying to match Ishita's confident chopping. Emily, meanwhile, was in charge of spices, sniffing jars and occasionally waving a finger at Logan. "Too much salt! Or maybe not enough? How are we supposed to know? You're the chef, remember?" she teased, her grin mischievous.

Logan, however, was completely in his element, moving with an easy confidence around the small kitchen, stirring sizzling pans and flipping vegetables with practiced precision. Occasionally, he would taste a spoonful of sauce, nod approvingly, then make some dramatic adjustment that had Emily rolling her eyes and muttering, "Chef much?" Ishita laughed, nudging Ananya gently. "See? This is how cooking is supposed to look. Calm, controlled... and slightly ridiculous."

In the living room, the boys had claimed seats around the small dining table, lounging casually but watching the chaos with amusement. Arjun, still nursing his bruises, leaned back against the sofa, observing the girls' interactions with a mix of fascination and quiet warmth. Vedant, who had been tense all evening, seemed to loosen up for the first time, letting out soft chuckles at Emily's sarcastic remarks and Logan's exaggerated chef theatrics. Viren, always the serious one, tried to keep a straight face but couldn't help smirking when Raxit whispered a running commentary about Logan's "commanding presence" and Ishita's mock bossiness. Shivansh, calm as ever, simply shook his head and smiled quietly, content to watch the room fill with warmth.

Aromas of sautéed vegetables, garlic, spices, and rich sauces filled every corner of the apartment, mingling with the faint hum of city traffic outside. Plates were lined up haphazardly on the counter, some ready for service, others waiting to be loaded with food. Laughter spilled freely through the room, bouncing off the walls and echoing in the small kitchen. Conversations overlapped—Ananya shyly sharing a story about her first day in Birmingham, Emily teasing Vedant about his overly cautious nature, Ishita joking with Logan about his "dramatic chef flair," and Raxit narrating minor, exaggerated details of the earlier fight to keep everyone entertained.

By the time the clock hands inched past one in the morning, the apartment had a cozy, chaotic aura. The kitchen counter was scattered with knife marks, vegetable peels, and tiny splatters of sauce, evidence of the lively culinary endeavor. Yet, the plates were empty, laughter still lingered, and the warmth of shared effort had settled into every corner. Everyone was relaxed, happy, and full—not just of food, but of the rare, unbroken camaraderie that only nights like this could create.

Logan stretched, rolling his shoulders with exaggerated satisfaction, and glanced at the group. "Alright, everyone," he said, his voice carrying both authority and amusement, "it's far too late to go wandering home now. Beds will be tight, but that's the price of team bonding. You're all staying here tonight, no exceptions."

The boys exchanged glances, a mix of relief and mild apprehension at the prospect of crammed sleeping arrangements. Arjun, sitting near the corner of the sofa, let out a soft chuckle, the sound unburdened by tension. For once, the adrenaline, unease, and lingering worry from earlier in the day seemed distant, as though the fight and chaos belonged to another world entirely.

He glanced around the room, taking in the girls laughing as they wiped their hands on towels, Logan humming softly while clearing the

dishes, Vedant teasing Raxit quietly, and the faint glow of the kitchen light reflecting off the shiny countertops. A sense of peace settled in his chest, warm and steady. For the first time in weeks, there was nothing pressing him, nothing threatening, nothing to fear. The only thing that existed in that moment was companionship—pure, effortless, unbroken.

And in that rare, unguarded night, Arjun realized something simple but profound: the warmth, laughter, and shared presence of friends—of those he cared for—was more important than any fight, any worry, or any challenge the world could throw at them. For that night, in that small apartment in Birmingham, everything else could wait.

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Logan's eyes swept over the boys with mock seriousness. "Listen up. You're all staying here tonight. No exceptions. I don't care how comfortable—or uncomfortable—you think it'll be. This is non-negotiable. Team bonding isn't optional. Consider it... survival training with extra laughs."

Arjun felt a warm, almost protective relief wash over him. For once, there was no lingering threat outside, no shadows of the day's street fight, no tension about the unknown. Everything that mattered was

here—in the laughter of friends, the gentle teasing of the girls, the glow of the kitchen lights reflecting off the counters, and the soft hum of nighttime Birmingham outside the window.

Vedant chuckled quietly. "Well... looks like we're sleeping in shifts or on couches tonight."

Raxit grinned, nudging him. "Shift or no shift, it's going to be hilarious watching all of you try to find a comfortable spot."

Logan clapped his hands together, satisfied. "Exactly. Everyone, make yourselves at home. Grab blankets, cushions, whatever you need. No one leaves. Not even you, Arjun." He gave him a pointed look, teasing but firm, and Arjun could only grin sheepishly in response.

As the boys began arranging couches, pulling chairs closer, and finding corners to settle in, Arjun leaned back against the sofa and took a deep breath. For once, the adrenaline, unease, and lingering worry from earlier in the day seemed distant, as though the fight, the street tension, and the threat of the unknown belonged to another world entirely. The laughter, chatter, and warmth around him made every worry fade into insignificance.

That night, all of them—Arjun, Vedant, Viren, Shivansh, and Raxit—would stay together at Logan's apartment. The late-night

camaraderie, the shared stories, the playful arguments, and even the cramped sleeping arrangements wouldn't matter. For now, the bonds of friendship, laughter, and the quiet security of being together were what defined the night, and for the first time in weeks, Arjun felt truly at ease.

Chapter 5 : closes

Chapter 6-“Whispers of Her”

Chapter:6- **“Whispers of Her”**

The classroom buzzed softly with the low hum of scribbling pens and rustling notebooks. The teacher stood at the front, chalk in hand, drawing overlapping circles on the board.

“Covalent bonds involve the sharing of electrons between atoms,” he explained. “Ionic bonds, on the other hand, are formed by the complete transfer of electrons. Any questions?”

Raxit’s pen moved with flawless precision, jotting down every word. As always, he was the picture of focus—the topper everyone else silently measured themselves against. Vedant leaned back slightly in his chair, nudging Viren, who whispered something that made the corner of Vedant’s mouth twitch in a suppressed grin. Shivansh barely paid attention, half-listening while doodling in his notebook.

Arjun tried to focus on the diagrams of molecular structures, but his mind refused to cooperate. Instead, he found himself thinking about **Ananya**. Her smile from the lounge last evening, the way she had hesitated over a tricky problem, the soft laugh that had escaped her when Raxit had made a dry comment about her handwriting—all of it replayed in his mind like a quiet, persistent melody.

He glanced at Raxit again. The boy was still perfectly focused, writing down every detail with methodical precision. Arjun couldn't help but feel a pang of admiration—and maybe a little envy. Unlike Raxit, whose world seemed ordered and clear, Arjun's thoughts kept drifting to a girl who wasn't even in the Elite class, a girl who had a way of occupying his mind without even trying.

Vedant's elbow nudged his side. "Lost in thought again?" he whispered, eyes gleaming with amusement.

Arjun blinked, startled out of his reverie. "Uh... just... focusing," he mumbled, forcing his gaze back to the board.

Viren smirked, whispering something to Shivansh about Arjun acting "weird" again, and the corner of Arjun's mouth twitched in an involuntary smile. Yes, he was acting weird. But it wasn't about the chemical bonds or even the lecture. It was about Ananya—the way her presence lingered in his mind long after she left, the way he found himself imagining small gestures, like her tucking a strand of hair behind her ear or laughing at a silly joke.

The bell rang, cutting through the soft murmur of the classroom. Students began gathering their books, shoving notebooks into bags and exchanging quiet goodbyes. Raxit packed efficiently, clearly

planning the next study session in his mind. Vedant nudged Arjun one last time, shooting him a knowing glance.

Arjun gathered his own notes, still smiling faintly to himself. Even as he left the classroom, his mind lingered on Ananya. He imagined her at the lounge, maybe struggling with an assignment, maybe laughing with friends. And somewhere in that mental replay, his heart skipped a beat.

For a moment, Arjun realized that **chemical bonds on the board couldn't compete with the bond he was beginning to feel forming—quiet, delicate, and far more complicated than any equation he had ever solved.**

Arjun slung his bag over his shoulder, still caught in thoughts of Ananya, when a light tap on his shoulder made him startle.

"Oi, daydreamer," Raxit said, a teasing smirk on his face. "You do realize you're in **Chemistry class**, right? Or are you solving the mysteries of the universe over there in your head?"

Arjun chuckled awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah... I'm paying attention... sort of."

Raxit raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. "Sort of isn't going to keep your grades up, you know. At this rate, you're lucky I haven't

seen your last test scores. You're slipping, Arjun. And no, blaming it on thinking about girls doesn't count."

Vedant, catching the exchange, stifled a laugh. "Raxit's right, man. You need to focus at least a little. You can't daydream through every lecture."

Arjun's face flushed slightly, but he grinned. "I... I'll try. Chemistry isn't exactly the problem, anyway." He glanced down the corridor, imagining Ananya sitting in the lounge, flipping through her notes.

Raxit shook his head, half exasperated, half amused. "Try harder. You've got brains, Arjun, but apparently, they like to wander at the most inconvenient times. Focus in class, or I swear I'll start grading your lunch breaks next."

Arjun laughed, feeling a mix of embarrassment and warmth. The gentle ribbing reminded him that, no matter how distracted his mind was, he had friends who noticed and cared—friends who could push him without making him feel stupid.

Vedant clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, man. We'll keep an eye on you. But hey, if you ever need a reminder to pay attention, Raxit's your guy."

Raxit smirked again. "Exactly. Now get your head back in the game before you start dreaming about electrons instead of people."

Arjun groaned playfully but tucked the words away in his mind. Maybe tomorrow he would focus more—but right now, all he could think about was Ananya, and the thought made his chest warm in a way no chemistry lecture ever could.

"Arjun really needs to pay attention next time," Raxit muttered. "Otherwise, he's going to slip further behind."

Vedant chuckled. "Don't worry. He'll survive... probably. But yeah, we'll plan the next session to cover all the tricky chapters. Maybe include a little extra motivation for him."

Arjun trailed behind them, feeling slightly amused by their seriousness. He didn't mind their teasing; it was part of the rhythm of life in the Elite batch. As he turned the corner toward the lounge, he noticed **Shivansh and Viren leaning against the wall, whispering and trying not to laugh.**

"Did you see him spacing out in class again?" Viren whispered, eyes glinting mischievously.

Shivansh smirked. "Yeah. Totally lost in his own world. Wonder what's going on in that head of his. Probably daydreaming about someone."

Arjun froze mid-step, realizing they had spotted him—not that it mattered; he knew exactly who they meant. His cheeks warmed slightly, but he couldn't help the small smile that tugged at his lips.

"Whatever," he muttered under his breath, walking past them toward the lounge. "Let them talk. I've got other things on my mind."

Viren and Shivansh exchanged a knowing glance and stifled laughter as Arjun disappeared down the corridor.

The lounge was quiet, bathed in the late-afternoon sunlight streaming through the windows. Arjun found a corner, pulled out his notebook, and let his thoughts wander again—this time, fully to **Ananya**, imagining her quietly studying in her own space, unaware of the storm of attention she had sparked in his mind. Raxit was in mid-sentence, flipping through his notebook with Vedant, when he suddenly looked up.

"Wait—where's Arjun?" he asked, scanning the hallway.

Vedant glanced around too, slightly puzzled. "He was right behind us when we left class..."

Raxit closed his notebook with a snap, rolling his eyes. "Unbelievable. He sneaks off the second we start planning? Typical Arjun. If I don't keep an eye on him, he'll disappear into thin air."

Vedant smirked knowingly. "Disappeared, or just... wandered where his heart wanted to go?"

Raxit frowned, then sighed, realizing what Vedant meant. "Oh, no. Don't tell me he's gone to—" He cut himself short, shaking his head. "This guy. He's supposed to be studying chemistry, not... whatever this is."

Vedant chuckled. "Relax. Maybe this is chemistry too, just a different kind."

Raxit groaned at the pun but couldn't help a small laugh. "If he comes back looking dazed again, I swear I'll drag him back into focus myself."

The two of them continued walking, their voices fading down the corridor, while Arjun was already seated in the lounge, caught between notes and the thought of **whether Ananya might walk in at any moment.**

Arjun sat in the lounge, notebook open in front of him but untouched. His pen rested loosely between his fingers as his thoughts drifted.

The door swung open, and laughter spilled in. **Ananya walked in with her English friends, her voice blending softly with theirs.** For a second, the world seemed to blur around Arjun.

She wasn't dressed any differently from the others—just a simple top and jeans—but somehow, she stood out. The way she carried herself, her easy smile, the way her hair caught the faint light from the window—everything about her drew his attention.

Arjun felt his heartbeat quicken. She looks so effortless... how does she manage that?

As she leaned over to show her friend something in a notebook, Arjun's gaze lingered a second too long. He noticed the curve of her posture, the grace in her movements. Her figure, her presence—everything seemed amplified to him in that moment.

He quickly looked down at his own notes, pretending to write something. Focus, Arjun. Don't make it obvious. But his mind betrayed him, replaying that smile, that laugh, over and over again.

Across the lounge, Ananya glanced up briefly. Her eyes swept the room and landed, just for a heartbeat, on him. Arjun froze, then darted his gaze back to the page, as if the chemical formulas he hadn't written yet were suddenly of life-or-death importance.

A faint warmth rose in his chest. He knew he should concentrate, but with her here, even silence felt charged.

His thoughts were tangled up in the sound of Ananya's laugh across the room, the way her eyes lit up when she spoke with her friends.

She doesn't even realize how she pulls every bit of focus from me... he thought, his chest tightening with something he couldn't put into words. The world outside her presence faded—notes, deadlines, even the chatter of the lounge—all of it dissolved into background noise.

"Arjun!"

The sharp call jolted him out of his thoughts. He blinked, turning toward the doorway, where **Raxit stood with his arms crossed, Vedant just behind him grinning knowingly.**

Raxit's tone carried the perfect mix of irritation and amusement. "What do you think you're doing? The next class is about to start, and here you are, acting like you've forgotten what a classroom looks like."

Arjun scrambled slightly, closing his notebook. "I... I was just—"

"Daydreaming?" Vedant cut in, smirking.

Arjun shot him a look, but the redness creeping into his face betrayed him.

Raxit sighed, shaking his head. "You're impossible. Come on before I drag you there myself. You can drown in your thoughts later—preferably after you've passed your exams."

Arjun stood, his eyes flicking once more toward Ananya before he followed his friends out. She was still laughing with her group, unaware of the storm she'd stirred inside him.

As they walked down the corridor, Vedant nudged him lightly. "Lost in thought again, huh? Let me guess—chemistry?"

Arjun rolled his eyes, but deep down, he knew Vedant wasn't entirely wrong. It wasn't *chemical bonding* that had consumed him... it was something far stronger.

The three of them slipped into their seats just as the **Physics teacher** began the lecture. Chalk squeaked across the board, drawing circles and arrows.

"Circular motion," the teacher announced firmly. "One of the most important topics in mechanics. Every object in rotation follows strict laws—whether a satellite orbiting Earth or a stone tied to a string."

Arjun stared at the neat diagram, the perfect circle, the arrows of force. But almost instantly, his mind drifted—Ananya's smile, the way her laughter curved through a room, the pull she seemed to have on him like gravity itself.

"...centripetal force always acts toward the center..." the teacher continued, underlining the diagram.

Arjun blinked. Center. Pull. Force. The words twisted into his own thoughts. That's exactly what she feels like. Like some unseen center drawing me closer no matter how much I resist.

Next to him, Raxit noticed his pen lying idle. He leaned over with an annoyed whisper. "Arjun. Write. Or do you want me to spin you around in circles until you learn what centripetal force feels like?"

Vedant, from behind, couldn't resist. "Relax, Raxit. He's probably just calculating the force needed to keep his mind revolving around someone."

Arjun gave Vedant a sharp look, but his reddened ears betrayed him. He bent down and scribbled something quickly on the paper, though it looked more like random loops than real notes.

The teacher's voice cut through again: "Now, if the object loses its force toward the center, it flies off in a straight line—no longer bound."

Arjun swallowed, feeling as if the words were meant for him. He wanted to focus, to stay grounded, but his thoughts kept circling, unbroken, around the same center.

By the time the bell rang, his notebook was a mess of half-drawn circles and equations he barely remembered writing.

Raxit sighed, closing his own book neatly. "Pathetic. You're supposed to be calculating angular velocity, not writing poetry in circles."

Vedant chuckled. "At least he's consistent—his brain's stuck in circular motion too."

Arjun shook his head, forcing a smile, though his heart still carried the same unshakable pull.

As the students packed up after Physics, the chatter of the Elite class filled the room again. Arjun stuffed his books into his bag, but his mind was nowhere near the next lecture.

Vedant noticed his distracted movements. "You're not seriously skipping the last class, are you?"

Arjun hesitated, then met Vedant's eyes with a tired smile. "Yeah... I don't think I can sit through another one today. I just—need some air."

Vedant tilted his head knowingly. "Air, or space to think about someone?"

Arjun didn't answer, just slung his bag over his shoulder. "Cover for me, will you?"

Before Vedant could tease him further, Arjun slipped out of the classroom, down the corridor, and through the front gates. The noise of campus faded behind him as he broke into a light jog, heart pounding—not from exertion, but from the weight of emotions he couldn't shake.

The nearest park wasn't far. He found a bench under the shade of an old tree and collapsed onto it, breathing hard. The world felt quieter here—birds chattering, leaves rustling gently in the breeze. For the first time all day, no one was watching him.

Arjun pulled out his phone, thumb hovering over the familiar app. He opened **Instagram**, his chest tightening as her profile appeared. "Ananya."

He scrolled slowly, picture after picture—her smile in group selfies, her focused look in candid shots, the way her presence seemed to brighten every frame. Each image made his heart ache with something he couldn't put into words.

For nearly an hour, he sat there, lost between longing and hesitation. The laughter of children playing nearby, the distant hum of traffic—none of it mattered. His entire world had shrunk down to the glow of the screen and the pull of her presence in his life.

Why does it feel like I can't escape this? he thought, his fingers brushing the edge of her latest picture. Why does it feel like she's the center I keep orbiting, no matter how hard I try to look away?

He let out a heavy sigh, leaning back against the bench, unaware that his story with her was about to take a turn he hadn't expected.

After nearly an hour of sitting in the park, staring at his phone until the screen blurred, Arjun finally stood. He slid his hands into his pockets, his steps slow as he started back toward campus.

The streets felt different now, and it took him a moment to realize why. Shop windows that once displayed light summer shirts and casual wear were now filled with **woolen sweaters, scarves, and thick**

coats. A mannequin stood draped in a heavy jacket, a beanie pulled low, as though mocking his distraction.

Arjun slowed, his eyes scanning the racks and displays. A small shiver crept up his arm as the breeze brushed past. *Woolens already?*

That's when it hit him. **Five months.**

It had been five months since he'd arrived in Birmingham—five months of classes, exams, laughter with the Elite batch, late-night study sessions, and countless stolen glances at Ananya. Five months that felt like both a blur and a lifetime.

He exhaled, a cloud of mist barely visible in the cooling air. *Winter's ahead...* he thought, though part of him knew the chill he felt wasn't just from the weather.

The season was changing, and with it, something inside him too. His life here no longer felt temporary or uncertain. It had roots now—roots that pulled him closer, tied him tighter, especially to one person.

With his hands still in his pockets, Arjun turned the corner toward the campus gates, the shop windows fading behind him. He felt the weight of the coming months pressing forward, but alongside it, a strange, undeniable warmth.

As Arjun walked toward the campus gate, hands buried deep in his pockets, he spotted a familiar figure moving through the dusky street. His heart stuttered—it was Ananya. She walked alongside one of her English friends, her scarf loose around her neck, her laughter carrying softly in the evening air. Without realizing, Arjun slowed his pace, his eyes fixed on her, following from a distance.

The sky was glowing with sunset's last fire, streaks of orange and violet fading into the deep blue of night. Streetlamps flickered on one by one, casting pools of golden light on the damp pavement. The air carried the scent of roasted chestnuts from a cart nearby, mixing with the cool sharpness of approaching winter.

Eventually, Ananya paused at a small shop nestled between two weathered brick buildings. The wooden door swung open with a chime, and an elderly woman inside greeted her with a wide smile. Ananya disappeared in, her figure swallowed by the warm interior. Arjun leaned against the cold stone wall, trying to look casual though his pulse hammered in his ears.

Ananya stepped out of the little shop, the warm light spilling out behind her. Her eyes instantly found Arjun leaning against the stone wall, hands shoved in his pockets, trying too hard to look casual.

"Arjun?" she said, her brows lifting in surprise.

He straightened quickly, as if caught doing something he shouldn't. "Hey... I was just passing by."

Her lips curved into the faintest smile, her gaze sharp yet playful. "Passing by... or following me?"

Arjun blinked, flustered. "What? No—of course not. I mean, I was just... walking, and then—"

Ananya's laugh spilled out, light and teasing, breaking through his fumbling words. "Relax, I was joking."

But the look in her eyes lingered, playful but curious, as though she wasn't entirely unconvinced. Arjun felt his heartbeat thrum in his ears, his pulse quicken in a way no exam ever had.

He cleared his throat, trying to regain composure. "So... what's this place?" He nodded toward the shop behind her.

Ananya glanced back, her expression softening. "That's Mrs. Fletcher's shop. She's an old woman who lives alone—lost her family

years ago. I come here sometimes to help her. Groceries, books, small chores... and she tells me stories about her life."

Arjun studied her as she spoke. Her voice carried a warmth that seemed to belong to another world—so different from the usual chatter of campus. For a moment, he forgot the noise of the street, the blur of cars, even the cold breeze tugging at his jacket.

"That's really kind of you," he said quietly.

Ananya shrugged, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's nothing big. Just... feels right to be there. She reminds me of my grandmother."

They began to walk together, their footsteps falling into rhythm. The evening had settled fully now, the last embers of sunset fading into a navy-blue sky. Streetlamps bathed the pavement in pools of golden light. Cars hissed past, headlights smearing across the damp road. A light wind stirred the fallen leaves, sending them tumbling along the sidewalk.

For a while, silence stretched between them—comfortable, not awkward. Arjun sneaked a glance at her. She walked with her scarf wrapped tight, cheeks tinged pink from the cold, her hair lifting

slightly in the breeze. He wondered if she could hear the thunder of his heart.

"You're quiet," Ananya said finally, glancing at him.

"I was thinking," Arjun replied.

"About what?"

He hesitated, searching for words that didn't sound foolish. "About how some people can find time to care for others... even when they already have so much to deal with themselves."

Her eyes softened, her steps slowing for a moment. "You make it sound like it's something extraordinary. It's really not."

"It is," he said, almost under his breath.

Ananya didn't reply right away, but her faint smile told him she'd heard.

They turned the corner, and a neon glow spilled across the pavement from a small shop—*Frosty's Delight*. Its glass windows were fogged from the warmth inside, and the sweet scent of caramel and waffle cones drifted out each time the door opened. Against the chilly night, it looked like a beacon of comfort.

Arjun caught the glow, then glanced at her. "Ice cream?" he asked, almost too casually.

Ananya let out a short laugh, hugging herself against the cold. "In this weather? You're mad."

"Sometimes the best things don't make sense," he said with a grin.

She tilted her head, narrowing her eyes at him, amused. "Alright... but only if you're paying."

"Deal."

He pushed the door open for her, the small bell above chiming. Instantly, a wave of warmth washed over them—the cozy heat of heaters, the sugary scent of chocolate, the glow of fairy lights strung across the ceiling. The shop was nearly empty, save for a couple by the window sharing a sundae, their laughter soft and close.

Arjun and Ananya stepped up to the counter. The chalkboard above listed flavors in colorful handwriting: *Honeycomb Crunch, Midnight Mint, Pistachio Bliss.*

"What'll it be?" Arjun asked.

"Strawberry," Ananya replied without hesitation. "Always strawberry."

"Classic," he teased, before ordering that for her and a chocolate fudge for himself.

They carried their cones to a small corner table, the window framing the street outside. Beyond the glass, the city glowed under streetlamps, headlights weaving through the darkness. Inside, the light was warm and soft, like a world apart.

Ananya took a bite, her face scrunching briefly at the cold, then she laughed. "Still think this was a good idea?"

"Best decision of the day," Arjun said, watching her more than his own ice cream.

She raised a brow. "You don't even like ice cream that much, do you?"

"Who told you that?"

"Logan," she replied with a smirk.

Arjun rolled his eyes. "He talks too much."

Her laughter rang again, softer this time, but it lingered. For a while, they sat quietly, the noise of the city muffled behind the glass. Arjun found himself memorizing the small things—the way she tapped her spoon absentmindedly against the cup, the way her gaze drifted

to the street and then back to him, the way her smile curved gently as if she knew something he didn't.

"You know..." she said after a pause, "you're different when you're outside class."

"Different how?"

"Less serious. More... real." She looked at him steadily. "I like that version better."

Arjun felt his chest tighten, warmth blooming despite the cold bite of his ice cream. He wanted to say something, something that might carry all the weight of what he felt, but the words stuck. Instead, he let the silence speak, their eyes holding for just a fraction longer than necessary.

Outside, the wind rattled the leaves against the glass. Inside, Arjun thought he could live in this moment forever.

Outside, the wind rattled the leaves against the glass. Inside, Arjun thought he could live in this moment forever.

Ananya lowered her spoon, her fingers brushing the edge of the table. For a fleeting second, her hand rested close enough to his that

he felt the faint warmth radiating from her skin. Their eyes met again, and this time neither of them looked away.

Arjun's breath caught. Words crowded at the edge of his tongue—You make this city feel less lonely... You're the only one I want to sit here with...—but before he could speak, the soft chime of the shop doorbell broke the stillness.

"Arjun! There you are," a familiar voice called.

Viren.

He stepped inside, rubbing his palms together against the light chill of the evening. His jacket hung loosely over his shoulders, and a teasing smile tugged at his lips as soon as he spotted them.

"Well, well," he said, walking toward their table. "So this is where you've disappeared to."

Ananya shifted slightly in her seat, smiling politely. "Hi, Viren."

Viren's grin widened. "Hello, Ananya. Didn't expect to find you here either. And with *this guy* of all people." He clapped Arjun on the shoulder as if to seal the joke. "Ice cream the moment winter starts—classic Arjun move."

Arjun forced a small smile, though the muscles in his jaw tightened. The fragile bubble he and Ananya had been wrapped in just minutes ago was gone, replaced by Viren's easy chatter.

"Mind if I join?" Viren asked, already pulling a chair before either of them could answer.

Ananya gave a polite laugh. "Of course."

Arjun looked at her for a moment, reading the glimmer of amusement in her eyes. She didn't seem to mind the interruption half as much as he did. Still, as Viren launched into his usual banter, Arjun felt the moment slipping further away, like sand through his fingers.

"So," Viren said, leaning back in his chair, brushing cookie crumbs from his hoodie, "aren't you forgetting something, Mr. Star Boy?"

Arjun looked up, startled. "Forgetting what?"

"Football practice," Viren said with mock gravity, wagging a finger at him. "Coach has been hunting you down all week. Big match this Saturday, and you're sitting here eating ice cream like it's the off-season."

Arjun's hand stilled around his cup, his face tightening. "I... I'll be there. I just needed some time."

"Time?" Viren chuckled, eyes glinting. "You sound like an old man making excuses. Next thing we know, you'll say you've retired."

Before Arjun could answer, Viren's gaze slid to Ananya, who had been quietly eating her strawberry scoop, watching the exchange with interest. "Did you know," Viren said, lowering his voice theatrically, "your friend Arjun here is one of the best players on the team?"

Ananya's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Really? You never told me that."

Arjun shifted in his seat, suddenly uneasy under both of their eyes. "It's not a big deal," he muttered, stabbing at his ice cream with the spoon. "I just... play."

"Not a big deal?" Viren burst out laughing. "This guy scored more goals in training than anyone else this season. He dribbles like the ball's tied to his shoelaces." He leaned closer to Ananya as if sharing a secret. "Don't let him fool you—he's practically our star striker."

Ananya tilted her head, a smile tugging at her lips. "That does sound impressive."

Arjun's ears burned. He shot Viren a look that screamed *stop*, but his friend was clearly enjoying himself.

Viren grinned wider. "You should come watch the match, Ananya. Front row seats. You'll see Arjun in his element."

Arjun nearly choked on his spoonful. "Viren—"

Ananya laughed softly, her eyes flicking toward Arjun, curious. "Maybe I will."

Arjun felt his chest tighten. This was supposed to be their quiet, easy moment together—the warmth of coffee shops and ice cream counters, not football talk. But Viren had dragged the stadium right into it.

As if that wasn't enough, Viren added, his tone turning sly, "Oh, and one more thing. You better straighten up, Arjun. Raxit's still angry about your recent... behaviour."

The words hit like a stone. Arjun stiffened, his easy smile vanishing. "What do you mean?"

Viren leaned back, licking the last of his cone with infuriating calm. "You know what I mean. He's not happy. You've been off lately—skipping out on practice, distracted, not your usual self. He thinks you've changed."

Arjun clenched his jaw, eyes flicking to Ananya, who was listening quietly, caught in the crossfire. The sweetness of the moment was gone; Viren had seen to that.

Viren's phone suddenly buzzed on the table, the screen lighting up with a familiar name: Shivansh. He answered lazily, leaning back in his chair.

"Hello? ... Yeah? Oh, you're alone?" Viren's eyebrows lifted. "Sure, sure, I'll come over. Give me twenty." He ended the call and pushed his chair back with a grin. "Well, duty calls. Shivansh's place tonight. He's home alone and apparently needs some quality company."

Arjun rolled his eyes. "You mean he's bored and you're the only one reckless enough to keep him entertained."

"Exactly," Viren said with a wink. He slapped Arjun's shoulder on his way out. "Don't get too comfortable here, Romeo." With that, he slipped into the night, leaving the two of them alone again.

Ananya laughed softly, shaking her head. "Your friends are... something else."

"Tell me about it," Arjun muttered, but there was an easy smile on his lips as he stood and gestured toward the street. "Come on, I'll walk you back."

They fell into step side by side, the winter chill brushing against their cheeks. The streetlamps glowed a soft amber, painting long shadows across the pavement. A few shops were closing for the night, shutters rattling down, while the faint hum of traffic carried through the distance.

As they neared the campus gates, Arjun hesitated before speaking. "Uh... would you like to come by my place for a bit? Just for tea or something." His tone was careful, almost nervous, as though testing the weight of the invitation.

Ananya glanced at him, her expression unreadable for a moment before a small smile spread across her face. "Sure. Tea sounds nice."

Relief loosened Arjun's shoulders. They made their way to the residency, climbing the familiar staircase. But as soon as he unlocked the door and pushed it open, both of them froze.

Inside, the soft glow of the television filled the living room. On the couch, Ishita sat with her head resting comfortably on Logan's shoulder, the two of them watching some comedy show, laughter spilling from the screen. It was a tender, almost domestic sight—one they clearly hadn't expected to be witnessed.

The door's creak broke the spell. Ishita's head snapped upright instantly, her cheeks flooding with color. "Oh! You're back—uh—we were just—" She fumbled, sitting a little straighter, as though the shift could erase what they had just seen.

Logan, ever the calm one, simply gave a lazy wave. "Hey. Want to join? The show's pretty good."

Arjun and Ananya exchanged a quick glance, the corners of their lips tugging upward at the awkwardness, before stepping inside. "Tea first," Arjun said lightly, setting down his bag.

A few minutes later, the four of them sat together around the small table, steaming cups in hand. The earlier embarrassment gradually dissolved into conversation—snippets of campus gossip, complaints about coursework, casual jokes. It wasn't loud or particularly eventful, but it felt warm, like a small bubble against the cold outside.

The night drifted by gently until drowsiness began to settle in. They eventually parted for their rooms, the residue of quiet laughter and shared warmth lingering in the air.

The air in the locker room felt heavier than usual, thick with a mix of nervous energy and anticipation. Boots scraped against the tiled floor, laces tightened, jerseys adjusted. But Arjun wasn't moving. He

sat hunched on the bench, his elbows digging into his thighs, his palms clammy against his knees.

His mind wasn't on the strategy board or the formation plan pinned to the wall. It was stuck on a single question looping endlessly in his head: *Will she come?*

"Stop drilling a hole into the floor." Viren's voice cut through his thoughts. He was grinning, as usual, tugging at his shin guards like the match was a casual Sunday game. "You're making me nervous just looking at you."

Arjun glanced up, his throat dry. "What if she doesn't?"

Viren raised an eyebrow, amused. "Who?"

Arjun didn't answer. He didn't need to.

"Ohhh," Viren drawled, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "Our boy's not nervous about the opposition. He's nervous about his... audience." He leaned back, arms crossed, enjoying the moment far too much. "Relax, Arjun. She'll come. Trust me."

Arjun shook his head, frustrated. "You don't know that."

Viren shrugged, unconcerned. "You don't sit with a guy at an ice cream shop and laugh at his stupid jokes if you're planning to skip his big match. She'll be there."

Arjun wanted to believe him. He really did. But the gnawing uncertainty wouldn't let go. His chest felt tight, his thoughts spinning faster than he could control.

A shrill whistle suddenly pierced the air. Everyone turned as Coach Hughes strode in, clipboard under his arm. His presence was commanding, sharp-eyed and stern, yet there was a steady warmth in the way he scanned his players.

"Listen up, boys," Hughes barked. The chatter died instantly. "This isn't just another game. This is a chance to show what we're made of. You've trained for weeks. You've run until your lungs gave out, drilled until your legs screamed, and sweated enough to fill a pool. Today, all that matters is this—play with focus, play with courage, and play as a team."

He thumped a fist against his chest, his voice rising. "Football is not just played with your feet. It's played with this—your heart. If you give me that, you've already won."

A ripple of fire spread through the team. The boys clapped, some shouting in agreement. Even Arjun felt something shift. The nerves didn't disappear, but they were reshaped, forged into determination.

Minutes later, they jogged out onto the pitch. The roar of the crowd—though modest—was still enough to send adrenaline coursing through their veins. The pale winter sun hung low, spilling gold across the field. Breath misted in the cold air, the grass crisp beneath their studs.

Arjun scanned the stands almost immediately, his pulse quickening. On one side, Vedant, Raxit, and Shivansh were standing, clapping and whistling obnoxiously, waving their arms like they owned the place. Typical.

But his eyes moved restlessly to the opposite deck—and there, he froze.

Emily stood, her bright hair catching the sunlight, cheering already. And beside her, Ananya. She was bundled in a coat, her cheeks flushed pink from the chill, but her smile was unmistakable. When their eyes met, she lifted her hand and waved.

Relief hit Arjun so hard he nearly staggered. The tension in his chest dissolved, replaced by a strange, heady lightness. His lips curved into

a smile he couldn't suppress, his heart thudding for a completely different reason now.

"Told you," Viren muttered with a smug grin, elbowing him.

Arjun ignored him, eyes still caught on Ananya. She had come. That was enough.

The referee's whistle screeched, pulling his focus back to the pitch. The opposing team strode out, black-and-red jerseys glinting under the floodlights. Their movements were sharp, confident, almost predatory.

And then Arjun saw him.

At the front, leading the formation, was a boy with a tall frame and a presence that demanded attention. His eyes were sharp, cold, and his expression carried an easy arrogance, as though the match was already his. His stance was relaxed but powerful, every step deliberate.

Arjun's stomach clenched. He knew that face. He'd seen him before.

Karthik.

The name rang in his mind like a warning bell.

The whistle blew again. The game was about to begin.

The referee's whistle split the winter air, shrill and commanding. The match had begun.

The green of the pitch gleamed under the pale sunlight, marked neatly with chalk lines. Both teams exploded into motion, their boots thudding against the ground, shouts and signals filling the air. The Elite team had chosen a bold **4-2-4 formation**—four defenders steadying the backline, two midfielders controlling the center, and four pushing forward for relentless attack.

At the tip of that spear were Arjun and Viren, standing side by side as dual strikers.

"Time to put on a show," Viren muttered, adjusting his gloves, his grin irritatingly confident.

Arjun exhaled, his chest tight. He wasn't thinking about the crowd or even the match strategy. His eyes had flickered once to the stands—where Ananya sat, her coat wrapped tightly around her, Emily beside her, both waving when they caught sight of him. That single glance had lit something inside him, a strange mix of courage and desperation. He couldn't fail with her watching.

The kickoff rolled. Their midfield seized control quickly, threading sharp passes under the first wave of pressure. The ball zipped along the grass toward Arjun.

He stepped forward, boot poised—only for another figure to cut across the space with startling precision.

Karthik.

He intercepted cleanly, his movements sharp and confident, his control effortless. He didn't even need to look at Arjun; his smirk said enough. In a fluid motion, he sent the ball wide to his winger and sprinted forward, carving a path for attack.

Arjun's blood boiled. That wasn't luck—it was skill. And it was deliberate.

"Track him!" someone shouted, but Karthik was already gone, tearing into their half like a blade.

Their defense scrambled to hold the line. A cross flew in, a header soared—just inches too high. The crowd groaned, half in relief, half in disappointment.

Arjun blew out a shaky breath. Close. Too close.

The next ten minutes were chaos. Both teams battled ferociously, the ball ricocheting from one end to the other. Viren played like he always did—flamboyant, cheeky, taunting opponents as he slipped past them with tricks and feints. The crowd loved it; every flick of his boot drew cheers.

But Arjun wasn't Viren. He was steady, focused, his style built on timing and precision. He didn't showboat. He waited.

And the chance came.

Viren intercepted a stray pass at midfield and surged forward. He could have gone alone, but instead, he flicked the ball sideways, eyes darting to Arjun.

"Your turn, hero," he called.

The ball rolled toward him. Arjun lunged, controlling it with his first touch. A defender closed in, but Arjun feinted right, cutting left sharply. His stride lengthened, the goal clear in his vision. The keeper braced, arms wide.

Arjun swung his leg—

Thud.

The shot was clean, fast, arrowing toward the corner. The stadium erupted—

—but the keeper dove, fingertips brushing the ball, sending it spinning just wide of the post.

The crowd gasped. Arjun stood frozen, chest heaving, his hands on his hips.

From the opposite end, Karthik's laughter carried across the pitch. Not mocking, exactly—but sharp, edged with challenge. *Try harder.*

Arjun's jaw clenched. His stomach churned, but his resolve hardened.

The match continued, a storm of near-misses and desperate tackles. Sweat poured down their faces despite the winter chill, breath steaming in the cold air. Every time Arjun's eyes flicked to the stands, he saw Ananya watching—hands clasped, leaning forward, caught in the match as much as he was.

And every time he saw Karthik charging forward, unyielding, confident, he felt the rivalry burn deeper.

By halftime, the score was still 0–0. Both teams retreated to their benches, collapsing with exhaustion, gulping water, coaches barking advice.

Arjun sat bent forward, breathing hard, his chest pounding. Viren slapped him on the back. "Not bad for the first half. That shot was fire—you'll bury the next one."

But Arjun didn't answer. His eyes were locked on Karthik across the pitch, the boy who hadn't stopped smirking since kickoff. The second half was coming. And it wasn't just about football anymore.

The whistle blew for the second half, and the energy stirred again on the small ground. Only fifty, maybe sixty people lined the touchlines, some sitting on plastic chairs, others standing with arms folded. Their voices weren't thunderous—just scattered claps, whistles, and mutters—but Arjun felt every sound echoing in his chest.

He pulled the captain aside. "Pass it to me. Wherever I am—just send it. I'll take it."

The captain studied him, then nodded. "Fine. But finish it."

The game restarted.

The first attempt came within minutes. The captain beat his man on the wing and floated the ball in. Arjun leapt, chesting it down, swung for the shot—

—but a defender slid across, blocking it clean. The ball bounced away.

A few groans rippled from the sideline. Arjun clenched his fists.

Second attempt. A through ball cut neatly past the midfield, finding Arjun in stride. He pushed forward into the box, chipped it—

too high. The ball grazed the top of the net and dropped out. A couple of kids near the line laughed, and one old man shook his head. Arjun bit down on his frustration, sweat burning in his eyes.

Third attempt. The captain drilled in a low cross. Arjun slid to meet it, his boot slicing through the grass—

—but the goalkeeper pounced, clutching the ball to his chest.

Arjun slammed his palms against the turf. Three chances. Three failures.

Then came the punishment. Their midfield fumbled under pressure, a weak pass intercepted. Karthik seized it, cutting past the weary center-back and slamming it into the bottom corner.

Scattered cheers burst from Karthik's supporters, sharp and mocking in the otherwise thin crowd.

1–0.

Arjun froze, chest hollow. Across the field, Karthik smirked, lifting his arms toward his small group of clapping friends.

"Shake it off," Viren said quickly, patting Arjun's shoulder. "One moment is all you need."

But Arjun's heart raced. He couldn't let this end here—not with Ananya watching quietly from the side, her hands folded, her expression unreadable.

Time bled away. Then, in the 78th minute, the moment arrived.

The captain tore down the right flank, his legs pumping, breath rasping. He looked up once and curled the ball in—a perfect pass arcing across the grass.

Arjun lunged forward, his instincts sharper than his doubts. The ball glued itself to his stride. A defender rushed—he sidestepped. Another closed in—he slipped the ball through.

Now it was him against six: four scrambling defenders, a midfielder retreating, and the keeper sprinting out.

For a heartbeat, the field narrowed, the murmurs from the sidelines fading into silence.

Arjun feinted left, pulled one man out of position, then twisted right. He spun past another, the ball never leaving his control. The keeper charged.

Arjun planted his foot and struck.

The ball curled high and fast, past the outstretched gloves, snapping into the corner of the net.

For a second, there was silence—then Viren grabbed him in a fierce hug, others piling on. Arjun looked instinctively toward the sideline.

Ananya was standing now, clapping with a small but undeniable smile.

The score was 1–1. The game was alive again. The referee's whistle signaled the end of regular time: **1–1.**

Both teams huddled on their sides of the small ground, gasping for breath. The cold evening air bit harder now, visible puffs escaping with each exhale. A couple of spectators shifted restlessly, pulling jackets tighter, but no one left—something about the tension held them rooted.

"Stay sharp," their English coach said, kneeling before the boys. His voice was calm but firm. "It's extra time now. Twenty minutes. Don't

let your focus slip. Arjun, Viren—you'll be the spear. If they press, punish them."

Arjun nodded, his jaw tight. He still felt the rush of his equalizer, but it was mixed with a gnawing nervousness. Across the pitch, Karthik stretched his arms lazily, smirking like the game already belonged to him.

The whistle blew again. Extra time began.

The first five minutes were cagey, both teams trading possession without breaking through. Then it happened.

A long ball from the opposition's midfield cut straight over the defense. Their striker—tall, broad, ruthless—slipped between the center-backs like a shadow. He brought the ball down on his chest and rifled it past the keeper before anyone could react.

Gasps spread among the fifty-odd spectators. A few claps, sharper this time, from Karthik's side.

2–1.

Arjun's stomach dropped. He barely had time to process before it got worse.

From the restart, their attack collapsed instantly. One sloppy pass from the left-back, a lightning interception, and suddenly Karthik himself was storming forward.

He danced past one, two, three defenders, his stride arrogant, deliberate. Arjun sprinted back desperately, but he was too far. Karthik slammed the ball into the bottom corner, then spread his arms wide, staring straight toward Arjun with a cruel grin.

3–1.

The scattered crowd buzzed louder now, a murmur that cut through Arjun's ears like static. His teammates groaned, some bending over in frustration.

Arjun froze near the center circle, chest heaving, mind spinning. Two goals in two minutes. From equal hope to drowning despair.

His eyes darted instinctively to the sideline. Ananya was still there, arms folded, lips pressed together. No smile now, just quiet concern.

Arjun swallowed hard. His fists clenched. He couldn't—he wouldn't—let it end like this.

The referee signaled for the next kickoff. Viren clapped his back. "Come on, Arjun. It's not over."

But for the first time that night, doubt sank deep into Arjun's bones.

The referee's whistle cut through the crisp morning air.

3–1.

Arjun stood still for a moment, chest heaving, before his knees gave in and he bent forward, palms pressing against them. His breath puffed in small clouds against the cold, and the sweat on his forehead chilled instantly in the light winter breeze.

The ground wasn't loud—barely fifty or sixty people scattered along the sidelines, some teachers, some students, a few friends. The rival team cheered modestly, clapping backs and exchanging handshakes. A couple of whistles and claps came from their side, but otherwise the sound faded quickly into the ordinary bustle of a school morning.

Karthik walked past him, smirk tugging at his lips. He didn't say a word, but the look was enough—mocking, victorious. Arjun turned away sharply, jaw clenched, throat tight.

When the players left the pitch, he trailed behind the others, dragging his boots across the damp grass. His head hung low, heart sinking with every step. It wasn't just losing—it was being helpless in those last minutes, watching the game slip away.

Near the benches, a small group waited.

Vedant was the first to step forward, his tone light but sincere. "That equalizer you scored? Brilliant, yaar. Don't let the loss erase that."

Emily chimed in, adjusting her scarf. "It's only an interschool match. Regular stuff. No one's writing history today—you played more than nice."

Raxit pushed his glasses up, his voice steadier. "Your game sense was sharp, Arjun. It's not about this match—it's about how much better you'll be the next one."

Finally, Ananya.

She had been quiet, arms crossed loosely as she watched him approach. Her voice was soft, careful. "You were really good out there. Honestly... I felt proud watching you."

Arjun lifted his eyes to hers, and for the first time since the whistle, the crushing weight eased slightly. The morning sunlight caught in her hair, and for just a moment, he forgot the scoreboard.

Still, when they all walked off together, laughter trying to lighten the mood, Arjun stayed a step behind. Their words lingered, but inside, he

was already replaying every mistake, every miss. The fire to prove himself again burned hotter with each breath.

This wasn't the end. Not by far.

The winter chill had grown sharper, mornings painted with pale light that clung stubbornly to the frost on the grass. Life around campus moved on as if nothing had happened, but for Arjun, the sting of last week's loss still lingered like an unhealed bruise.

He sat with Vedant in the quiet corner of the lounge, books sprawled but untouched. Vedant was flipping idly through his notes when Arjun finally broke the silence.

"Vedant..." his voice was low, hesitant. "Do you ever... feel sad when someone you like is with someone else?"

Vedant looked up, eyebrows raised. "You mean Ananya?"

Arjun gave a small, guilty nod. "Yeah. It hurts when I see her talking with Karthik. She laughs at his jokes sometimes, and I don't know... it just gets to me."

Memories from the week before flashed briefly—after the interschool match, a short but sharp exchange.

Arjun had walked past Karthik near the gates, and Karthik had thrown him a look filled with smug victory.
"Tough luck out there," Karthik had said casually, hands in his pockets. "Guess football's not really your thing."
Arjun's fists had clenched, but he bit back. "We'll see next time."
Karthik had shrugged with that arrogant grin. "If there is a next time."

The words had burned. And they still echoed now.

Back in the lounge, Arjun exhaled shakily. "Vedant, I... I think I really like her. I can't stop thinking about her. Every time she smiles at him, it feels like..." He trailed off, searching for words, "...like I'm slipping behind."

Vedant studied him for a moment, then leaned forward, voice calm but firm. "Arjun, listen—Ananya is her own person. She can talk to whoever she wants. That doesn't erase what you mean to her. If you like her, you need to show it—not by competing with Karthik, but by being honest with yourself."

Arjun stared at the table, heart pounding, torn between fear and longing.

The thought of confessing scared him more than any exam, any match, any challenge. But the thought of staying silent? That was unbearable.

chapter 7-“Unspoken Truths”

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It was a mid-November Saturday evening, the kind where the cold nipped just enough to make every breath visible in the air. The streets of Birmingham glowed under the amber haze of streetlamps, their light reflecting off damp pavements still slick from an afternoon drizzle.

Arjun and Raxit walked side by side without urgency, wandering through the neighborhood near their residency. Their sneakers splashed softly in shallow puddles. The city was alive but not overwhelming—pockets of laughter drifting from open café doors, a faint guitar melody strummed by a busker at the corner, the low hiss of buses pulling into stops.

Raxit blew into his hands dramatically. “Man, this weather’s like—cozy and depressing at the same time. Makes you think too much.”

Arjun smirked faintly. “Yeah... thinking too much is kind of my hobby.”

Raxit side-eyed him. “About what this time? Don’t tell me it’s Hughes’ speech again. If you say ‘discipline’ and ‘responsibility,’ I’m throwing you into the canal.”

Arjun chuckled, shaking his head. But his gaze lingered on the mist curling at the edges of the light. His silence stretched until he finally murmured, almost as if the night itself had pulled it out of him.

"Ananya."

Raxit's grin spread wide, satisfied. "I knew it. I was waiting for that name to drop."

Arjun shoved his hands deeper into his hoodie pocket. "She's... different. When she talks, it feels like everything else fades out. And when she's quiet, it's worse, because then I keep wondering what she's thinking."

Raxit let out a low whistle. "Bro, you sound like one of those tragic poets. Should I start calling you Shakespeare?"

Arjun laughed under his breath. "It's not that. It's just... I don't even know if she thinks of me that way. She probably doesn't. But I can't stop. She's in my head, even when I'm not trying."

They crossed the street toward a small tea shop glowing warm against the chilly evening. The glass windows fogged slightly from the heat inside, and without needing to discuss it, they slipped in. The bell chimed above them, and the scent of spiced chai filled the air.

They settled into a corner table with two steaming cups. Raxit stirred his tea lazily before leaning forward with a smirk. "So tell me, Professor Arjun—how long are you planning to keep this Nobel-level research on Ananya hidden from her?"

Arjun raised an eyebrow. "Nobel-level?"

"Yeah. The way you observe her, analyze every smile, decode every silence—dude, even Sherlock Holmes would say, 'Relax, bro.'"

Arjun laughed, then grew quieter. He stared at the tea swirling in his cup. "It's not easy. What if she already sees me as just... a friend? What if I ruin everything by saying more?"

Raxit leaned back. "And what if she's waiting for you to say something? What if she's wondering why you haven't already?"

Arjun hesitated, words caught between caution and hope. "You really think so?"

Raxit shrugged. "I'm not Cupid, man. But I do know one thing—if you keep this bottled up, it's going to eat you alive. And knowing you, you'll be stuck writing essays in your head instead of living it."

For a moment, Arjun smiled. "Essays in my head—that sounds about right."

They sipped their tea in companionable silence. Outside, the wind pushed at the shop's windows, rattling the frames, while life on the street moved steadily on. Yet for Arjun, time felt slower, heavy with thoughts he couldn't shake.

When they finally stepped back out into the night, Raxit clapped him on the back. "One day, my friend, you're going to have to man up and say it. Till then, I'll just enjoy watching you turn into a poet every time her name comes up."

Arjun laughed, though his eyes carried a weight he couldn't put into words. After a while, he set his cup down, leaning back slightly. "So... what's your plan for tomorrow? Sunday, I mean. Thought maybe we could all chill at my place, catch up, you know?"

Raxit tilted his cup, watching the steam fade. A faint smile tugged at his lips, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Honestly, I'd love to. But I can't this time. The major exam's coming up—I need to lock in. Too much is at stake."

Arjun blinked, surprised. "You? Saying no to a lazy Sunday? That's new."

Raxit chuckled softly. "Yeah, well. Even jokers have to get serious sometimes. If I don't prep now, I'll be dead later. Besides, you'll have

Vedant, Viren, Shivansh to bother you. You won't even notice I'm missing."

Arjun smiled faintly, though something about Raxit's tone felt heavier than his words. He didn't press, though. Instead, he simply nodded. "Fair enough. Just don't vanish into your books completely. We'll drag you out sooner or later."

Raxit raised his cup in a mock toast. "Deal. But until then, I'm a ghost."

They both laughed, the sound blending with the warm hum of the café. But as Arjun stared out at the blurred city lights, he couldn't help but feel that Sunday might feel emptier than usual.

They lingered a little longer, finishing the last sips of chai until the cups stood empty between them. The café had grown quieter, most of the tables now empty, the staff beginning to stack chairs against the wall.

"Guess that's our cue," Raxit said, standing and pulling on his jacket.

They stepped out into the November night once more, greeted by the cool bite of air. The warmth of the café clung faintly to their clothes but faded quickly against the breeze. Streetlamps stretched long

shadows on the pavement as the two walked side by side, their steps slower now, more thoughtful.

At the next junction, Raxit paused. "I'll head this way. Need to stop by the library before I call it a night."

Arjun nodded. "Alright. Don't stay buried in books too long."

Raxit smirked, clapping him lightly on the shoulder. "And don't stay buried in thoughts of Ananya too long. Both are dangerous."

Arjun rolled his eyes, but his smile gave him away. "Goodnight, Raxit."

"Night, bro."

They parted ways, Raxit disappearing into the dimly lit street, his figure soon swallowed by the mist. Arjun continued toward the residency alone, the cool air sharper now, his footsteps echoing softly on the wet pavement.

When Arjun reached home, the building loomed quietly against the night sky, windows glowing faintly with the warmth of other lives inside. The main door to the residency stood slightly ajar. Strange—Uncle was usually strict about locking it.

Arjun stepped in quietly, careful not to make a sound. The hallway was dim, the soft light from the living room spilling into the corridor.

He adjusted his steps, almost tiptoeing, when his eyes froze on the sight before him.

On the couch, framed by the pale glow of the lamp, sat Logan and Ishita—too close, closer than he had ever seen them. For a split second, they laughed softly about something, their voices low, intimate. Then, without hesitation, Logan leaned in, and Ishita didn't pull away. Their lips met in a quiet, unspoken kiss, tender yet certain, as if the world outside the room didn't exist.

Arjun stood rooted, breath caught in his chest. It was unbelievable—unexpected. Logan, his cousin, the ever-carefree one. Ishita, the calm mediator of their group. And here they were, sharing something that no one else knew.

For a moment, Arjun thought of stepping back, of making a sound, of anything—but instead, he stayed silent. The house felt different suddenly, filled with secrets it hadn't held a moment ago.His instinct took over. He stepped back quickly, retracing his steps toward the entrance as silently as he could. His fingers found the doorbell, and he pressed it, the chime breaking the heavy silence inside. A moment later, Ishita appeared, her expression composed though a faint flush lingered on her face. She opened the door with a small smile.

"The door was open," she said casually, as if nothing unusual had happened.

Arjun nodded, keeping his tone even. "Oh—sorry. Didn't notice."

She stepped aside, letting him in. The living room light spilled over Logan, who now sat relaxed on the couch, posture easy, as though nothing at all had just taken place. Arjun walked over and dropped himself on the same couch, a small gap between them.

"Long evening?" Logan asked lightly, his voice steady, betraying nothing.

"Yeah," Arjun replied, reaching for the remote. The television blinked to life, its glow filling the space. He tried to focus on the random channels flickering by, but the image of what he had just seen clung stubbornly to his mind.

Ishita lingered for only a moment before quietly excusing herself. "I'll head upstairs. Goodnight."

"Night," Logan answered.

Arjun gave a polite nod, but his thoughts stayed tangled. As the door clicked shut behind her, the weight of the secret he now carried seemed heavier than the silence that filled the room.

The TV flickered aimlessly in the background, but Arjun wasn't watching anymore. His eyes stayed fixed on Logan, steady and unblinking.

"How long has it been... you and Ishita?" he asked, his tone sharper now, cutting through the silence.

Logan froze, his smirk faltering. "What do you mean?" he tried, but his voice cracked just enough to betray him.

Arjun leaned forward. "Don't play dumb. I saw it—the kiss. You don't kiss someone like that unless something's going on."

Logan's jaw tightened. He raked a hand through his hair, staring at the floor as though the words would rearrange themselves into an easier answer. Finally, he muttered, "Since last month."

Arjun's brows knitted. "Last month? And you didn't think I deserved to know?"

"It's not like that," Logan said quickly, his voice laced with frustration. "We didn't hide it to hurt you. We're still figuring things out. It's... complicated."

"Complicated?" Arjun repeated, his tone quieter but heavier. "She's practically family, Logan. She's always been closer to me than anyone

else here. You knew this would matter, and yet you—" He stopped himself, pressing his lips into a thin line.

Logan's shoulders sank. "I know, okay? I didn't want to drag you into it until I was sure. Until we were sure. I wasn't even sure I deserved her."

Arjun studied him for a long moment. The Logan he knew—loud, playful, confident—looked strangely vulnerable now, his voice stripped of its usual bravado.

"Do you love her?" Arjun asked finally, his words slow, deliberate.

Logan's eyes flicked up, meeting his cousin's gaze. He hesitated, then nodded once, firmly. "Yeah. I do. That's why I'm scared. She deserves more than some half-baked relationship. I don't want to mess this up."

Arjun leaned back, exhaling. His chest felt tight, not from jealousy but from the weight of knowing this could change everything. "Then don't play games with her. If you're serious, be serious. She's not someone you can afford to hurt, Logan."

Logan swallowed, his voice barely above a whisper. "I know."

The two sat in silence, the TV buzzing on with meaningless noise. The air between them wasn't just heavy—it was fragile, like one wrong word could shatter it.

Finally, Arjun broke the silence, his tone measured. "Your secret's safe with me. But just remember... once feelings get involved, secrets don't stay secrets for long."

Logan nodded, his expression caught somewhere between gratitude and guilt.

And for the first time that night, Arjun turned his eyes back to the screen, though he still wasn't watching. His mind was already racing ahead—about Logan, about Ishita, about how much more complicated life inside this house was about to get.

After the conversation, neither cousin said much more. The TV kept running, throwing dim light across the room, but the silence between them grew heavier than any dialogue could fill.

Arjun stood up quietly. "I'm turning in," he said, his voice steady but low. Logan gave a small nod, not looking up.

Climbing the short flight of stairs to his room, Arjun felt his thoughts pressing in—the image of Logan and Ishita, the weight of Logan's confession, and the strange mix of unease and protectiveness

it left behind. Pushing his door open, he slipped inside and closed it softly behind him, shutting out the rest of the house.

He lay down on his bed without even switching on the light, staring at the faint shadows on the ceiling. His chest rose and fell slowly, the stillness of the room pressing down like a blanket. For a long time, his mind wrestled with everything—questions without answers, truths that changed the shape of his world.

Eventually, exhaustion dulled the sharp edges of his thoughts. His eyelids grew heavy, and in the quiet hum of the November night, Arjun drifted into an uneasy sleep.

Arjun stirred awake to a dim, cloud-heavy morning. The curtains leaked only a sliver of light, the kind that made the room feel heavier rather than brighter. He blinked at the clock on his desk—**11:25 a.m.** He'd overslept.

Groaning softly, he pushed himself up and patted around for his phone on the bedside table. The screen lit up, momentarily blinding him. Notifications glowed, but his eyes went straight to the chat from Vedant.

> **Vedant:** Sorry, out for some work today so can't keep up with you.

Vedant: And Viren's down with a fever. His p.a. aka Shivansh is with him.

Vedant: So... looks like you'll have to spend this Sunday alone.

Arjun stared at the words, his thumb hovering, unread messages stacked like tiny rejections. His chest tightened, and before he realized it, he let out a sharp, heavy exhale—half frustration, half resignation. The sound echoed in the stillness of his room, breaking the silence that had been sitting there all morning.

He dropped the phone back onto the bed and ran a hand through his hair. Another empty day stretched before him, lonelier now that he knew he'd be facing it alone.

After brushing his teeth and taking a quick shower, Arjun left his room and headed straight to the hall. The house was unusually quiet for a Sunday, the soft hum of the heater the only sound breaking the stillness.

He froze for a moment. On the couch, **Logan—who was almost always up before 6:30 a.m.—was still sleeping**, wrapped in a blanket, his face pale and damp with sweat. Concern flickered across Arjun's expression.

"Logan?" he called softly, stepping closer.

Logan groaned, shifting slightly but not opening his eyes. Just then, Ishita appeared in the doorway, smiling gently. "Good morning, Arjun," she said, her voice calm as she walked over and sat down near Logan, lightly adjusting his blanket around him.

Arjun raised an eyebrow, still processing the scene. "Oh... so you guys aren't doing anything today?" His tone was a mix of surprise and amusement, but under it lingered concern.

Ishita shook her head. "Nope. Logan's been running a fever since last night. He needs rest, and I'll stay with him for now."

Arjun let out a small exhale, sinking onto the chair opposite them. The unusual quiet of the hall, combined with the sight of Logan confined to the couch, made the morning feel slower than any other Sunday he could remember.

"Figures," he muttered, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Looks like I'm on my own today too, then."

Ishita glanced at him kindly. "You can still relax, though. Maybe catch up on things you've been putting off—or just enjoy some peace for once."

Arjun nodded, though his mind already wandered to what he might do to fill the long, quiet day.

Arjun leaned back in his chair, glancing at the still-sleeping Logan and the quietly attentive Ishita. With a small shrug, he muttered to himself, "Well... might as well make the day interesting."

He pulled out his phone and opened Google, fingers hovering over the search bar. "Things to do in Birmingham today," he typed, scrolling through the results. Cafés, street markets, small museums, parks, and hidden art galleries flashed across the screen.

His eyes lit up at the thought of wandering through parts of the city he hadn't explored before. He tapped a few links, reading reviews, and mapping out a rough route. There was a park with a riverside walk, a weekend street market with handcrafted items, and a small café that came highly recommended for its desserts.

A small grin spread across his face. "Guess it's me versus the city today," he murmured, already feeling the stirrings of excitement.

He grabbed his jacket, slipping his phone into the pocket, and took a deep breath. For the first time that morning, the quiet of the house felt less like loneliness and more like freedom. Today, the city was his to explore.

Arjun reached the ground floor, the quiet of the building stretching around him. The lobby was empty except for the soft hum of the elevator and the faint creak of the stairwell.

Just as he stepped toward the main entrance, he noticed a familiar figure standing there—**Ananya**, adjusting her scarf and glancing at the notices pinned to the wall. Her hair caught the soft morning light filtering through the glass doors, and she looked up, smiling as she saw him.

"Hey, Arjun!" She greeted me warmly.

He stopped, caught off guard but happy. "Ananya! Hey... didn't expect to see you this morning."

She laughed softly, a small sparkle in her eyes. "I thought I'd step out for a walk before the city wakes up too much. Didn't think I'd run into anyone I know here."

Arjun nodded, a smile tugging at his lips. "Looks like we had the same idea today."

They chatted as they stepped out into the crisp morning air, talking about small things—the quiet streets, weekend plans, and little observations about the city. Laughter came easily, filling the space between them, until gradually their words faded. A comfortable

silence settled, broken only by the distant sounds of the awakening city.

Arjun glanced at her, feeling the quiet press around them. Taking a small, hopeful risk, he finally asked, "Hey... actually, I'm alone today. Vedant's out, Viren's sick, and Raxit's buried in his books... so... would you like to accompany me? Maybe explore the city together?"

Ananya blinked in surprise for a brief moment, then her face lit up with a warm, genuine smile. "I'd love to," she said softly.

Relief and a quiet excitement settled in Arjun's chest. The streets outside were cool and quiet, the mid-November sky hanging low with gray clouds but not quite threatening rain. Arjun and Ananya fell into step beside each other, the rhythm of their footsteps unhurried.

"So," Ananya said, tilting her head toward him, "since you invited me, what's the plan, Mr. Guide?"

Arjun chuckled, pulling out his phone. "Well, I was planning to explore the city alone. But since you're here, guess I'll have to pretend I actually know what I'm doing."

She laughed, her voice carrying lightly in the still morning. "That doesn't sound very reassuring."

He grinned, tapping at the screen. "Okay, okay—there's a street market not too far from here. Supposed to be lively even on Sundays. Thought we could start there, then maybe grab coffee."

"Now that sounds better," she said, giving an approving nod.

They reached the market within fifteen minutes, the air filled with the scent of roasted nuts, fresh bread, and spices. Vendors called out cheerfully, stalls stacked with colorful crafts and steaming food.

Arjun slowed, taking it all in, while Ananya darted forward with curious eyes. She paused at a jewelry stall , holding up a delicate bracelet. "This is pretty," she murmured, then glanced at him with a mischievous smile. "Think it suits me?"

Arjun raised an eyebrow, pretending to scrutinize. "Hmm... maybe. But you might just be fishing for compliments."

She laughed, slipping the bracelet back onto the stand. "Maybe I am."

the chill in the air seemed to deepen, and Ananya tucked her hands into her jacket pockets. Arjun glanced at the time on his phone. It wasn't too late yet, but the gray November sky made it feel closer to evening.

"Hey," he said suddenly, turning to her. "Want to take a little detour? Cannon Hill Park isn't too far. It's supposed to be beautiful this time of year."

Ananya tilted her head, curious. "Cannon Hill Park? Never been."

"Well then," Arjun said with a grin, "today's the day. But we'll take the bus—walking all the way will kill us both."

She laughed, nodding. "Fair enough. Lead the way, tour guide."

They found the nearest bus stop, a modest shelter with glass panels scratched by time. A few locals stood waiting, some with shopping bags, others with headphones tucked firmly in their ears. Arjun and Ananya stood side by side, the faint drizzle starting to patter against the roof.

"Feels more authentic, doesn't it?" Arjun joked, shoving his hands into his jacket. "City exploration via public transport."

Ananya giggled. "It definitely beats walking everywhere. Plus... it's nice to just blend in."

The bus arrived with a low rumble, brakes hissing as it pulled up. They boarded and found two seats by the window. The glass was

foggy, but as the bus rolled forward, the city unfolded differently—rows of red-brick houses, quiet shops, and the occasional splash of autumn leaves clinging stubbornly to trees.

For a while, they sat in comfortable silence, watching the world blur past. Then Ananya nudged him lightly with her elbow. "You really did plan this whole thing, didn't you?"

Arjun smirked. "Nope. This is pure improvisation. But I'm glad you came along. Otherwise, I'd probably just be sitting in some café alone, pretending to read."

Her smile softened, and she turned back toward the window. "Well... I'm glad too."

When the bus finally stopped near Cannon Hill Park, they stepped out into a wide stretch of green, the faint crunch of gravel under their shoes echoing in the quiet air. The paths were lined with bare-branched trees, their skeletal forms reaching into the gray sky as though sketching patterns against the clouds. A thin mist hovered over the lake, the surface reflecting the dull light of the late morning.

Families wandered with small children chasing after pigeons, couples strolled hand in hand, and joggers passed by with headphones tucked

firmly in place. Yet, despite the movement, the park carried a strange kind of calm, like the world was slowing down just for them.

Arjun inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the crisp air. "See? Worth the ride." His lips curved with a faint, satisfied smile.

Ananya's gaze drifted across the open field, where kids were laughing and throwing a frisbee. "It's... peaceful. Exactly what I needed," she murmured, her voice soft, as if speaking too loudly might disturb the serenity of the place.

They began walking slowly along the path, their shoulders almost brushing but never quite touching. Their steps fell into an easy rhythm, unhurried. The silence between them no longer felt awkward or forced—it was warm, unspoken, like the quiet understanding of two people who didn't need to fill every moment with words.

The crunch of their footsteps mingled with the distant rustle of leaves. A breeze swept past, carrying the faint smell of damp earth and roasted coffee from a nearby cart. Arjun glanced sideways at Ananya. She was looking straight ahead, her expression calm, but her eyes carried a flicker of thought—as though she was far away, lost in a place only she knew.

For a brief second, he wanted to ask what was on her mind, but instead, he let the silence linger, letting the moment stay untouched.

Ananya broke it first, her lips curling into a half-smile. "You know, you don't strike me as someone who'd enjoy quiet places like this."

Arjun's brow arched slightly. "Why not?"

"Because..." she hesitated, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "you always look like your head is full of calculations. Numbers, answers, plans. I didn't think you'd be the type to just... wander."

He chuckled under his breath, his gaze lowering briefly to the gravel path. "Maybe I'm full of plans because I rarely get moments like this. When I do, I want to hold on to them."

Ananya turned to look at him then, surprised by the honesty in his tone. For a heartbeat, she didn't say anything, just studied him with quiet curiosity, as though seeing a side of him that most people missed. At the far end of the lake, the faint glow of warm lights spilled out from a small restaurant nestled between clusters of trees. Its wooden sign creaked slightly in the cold wind, and the windows glowed soft and golden, fogged up from the warmth inside. The smell of sizzling vegetables and spices drifted outward each time the door swung open, blending with the crisp November air.

"Hungry?" Arjun asked casually, though his own stomach had already answered with a faint growl.

Ananya laughed softly, hugging her coat closer. "More than a little. Let's go before you collapse from starvation."

They crossed the small stone path leading up to the entrance. Inside, the restaurant was cozy—low ceilings, framed pictures of landscapes on the walls, and warm lamps scattered across wooden tables. The hum of quiet chatter floated around them, punctuated by the clatter of cutlery and the sharp hiss from the kitchen as something hit a hot pan.

They chose a corner table near the window, where the lake shimmered faintly through the glass, its surface catching the last of the gray daylight. The waiter, moving briskly with a notepad, brought them steaming plates soon enough—noodles glistening with sauce, stir-fried vegetables sprinkled with sesame seeds, and chili paneer that sent a spicy aroma curling into the air.

Arjun dug in first, twirling the noodles around his fork. He glanced across at Ananya, who was valiantly trying to balance chopsticks in her hand.

"You know, you're holding them like weapons," he teased.

She glared playfully, her chopsticks clumsily gripping a cube of paneer before dropping it back on the plate. "Excuse me. I watched at least two YouTube tutorials on this. I'm practically a professional."

Arjun leaned back, grinning. "Professional in what? Catapulting food across the room?"

"Ha ha, very funny." She tried again, her tongue sticking out slightly in concentration, before finally lifting a piece of paneer with triumph. "See? Perfect form."

"Perfect form, shaky execution," he muttered, though the smile tugging at his lips gave him away.

They laughed, the easy rhythm of their banter cutting through the cozy hum of the restaurant. Between bites, their conversation flowed naturally—about classes, professors who seemed impossible to impress, and how different Birmingham felt compared to India.

"You know what I miss most?" Ananya said, pushing her empty plate slightly aside. "The noise. Back home it was always something—vendors shouting, neighbors fighting, my mom yelling for me to come down for dinner. Here it's... too quiet sometimes."

Arjun nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah. I get that. Birmingham is... organized. Too organized. Life back home felt like it just happened, even in the chaos. Here, it runs like it's scheduled."

She tilted her head, studying him. "So, you're saying you like chaos?"

"Not exactly." He twirled his fork idly, searching for the words. "But chaos makes me feel alive. It reminds me I'm not just... following a timetable."

Her expression softened. "You sound like a philosopher when you say things like that."

Arjun chuckled. "And you sound like you're mocking me."

"Maybe a little." She grinned, and the laughter that followed was light, unguarded, slipping into the air like it belonged there.

For Arjun, the sound stayed with him long after the plates were cleared.

When they finally stepped back outside, the evening had deepened. The sky stretched in a muted gray, the air brisk with the bite of late autumn. Across the lake, the water spread out like a quiet mirror, rippling gently whenever the breeze swept across its surface. Joggers

passed in pairs, couples strolled hand in hand, and children trailed behind parents clutching balloons.

They wandered slowly down a path, their footsteps crunching softly against the gravel, until they found a wooden bench tucked along the edge of the lake. The slats were cool against them as they sat side by side.

For a while, neither spoke. The stillness of the view seemed to fill the silence—the reflection of bare trees on the water, the occasional splash of a bird taking flight, the faint murmur of voices drifting from the other side of the park.

Arjun leaned back, his eyes fixed on the water. He was aware of how close she sat, of the way her coat brushed faintly against his arm. Normally, silences made him restless, but this one felt different—comfortable, almost warm.

Ananya shifted slightly, pulling her phone from her lap to check a message. Just as she did, it slipped from her fingers, tumbling onto the gravel beneath their feet.

"Oops." She bent forward quickly.

Almost instinctively, Arjun leaned forward at the same moment. Their shoulders brushed, their hands reaching toward the phone in

unison. Suddenly, they were much closer than either expected—faces just a breath apart.

For a suspended moment, the rest of the park seemed to dissolve. The wind, the water, the scattered voices—all blurred into the background.

Arjun could see the faint curve of her lips, the way her lashes fluttered as she blinked, the soft catch of her breath. Ananya, frozen in the closeness, could feel the quiet steadiness in his gaze, the warmth of his presence far too near.

Their hands hovered over the phone, almost touching. Neither pulled back right away.

The air seemed to hold its breath, the pause stretching longer than it should have. Something unsaid hung between them, fragile and charged, the kind of moment that could tilt into something more with the smallest push.

Then, Ananya let out a soft, nervous laugh, breaking the spell. She scooped up the phone quickly and pulled back, clutching it to her chest. "Guess I'm too clumsy today."

Arjun leaned back slowly, forcing a smile to cover the rush of heat in his chest. "Or maybe it was the phone's fault. Looking for attention."

She shook her head, turning back toward the lake, but the faint pink on her cheeks betrayed her.

Arjun followed her gaze, pretending to study the ripples on the water. Yet his thoughts lingered stubbornly on the nearness of her, on how for one second, the world had slowed down to just the two of them.

The bench held them for a long while. Conversation drifted back in fits and starts—lighter now, safer topics. They spoke about favorite foods, silly childhood mistakes, even a debate about which city had better street food—Delhi or Mumbai.

But beneath it all, the earlier moment lingered, quiet and unresolved, pressing softly at the edges of their laughter.

Every so often, when their eyes accidentally met, both looked away just a fraction too late.

And though nothing more happened, both of them felt it—the weight of what almost had.

As the quiet between them stretched, Ananya glanced at him, then at the fading sky. Her voice was gentle but laced with a hint of excitement.

"Hey... can we go to Bullring & Grand Central? I haven't been there in the evening yet."

Arjun blinked, a little surprised by her sudden suggestion. Then he nodded. "Yeah, sure. We've got time."

She smiled—small but genuine—and that alone was enough to make his chest feel oddly lighter. The time was just past 6:45 p.m., and the evening carried that in-between calm, not yet swallowed by night but no longer day.

They made their way back toward the bus stop, the lamps along the path flickering to life one by one, scattering circles of pale light on the ground. The air had grown colder, forcing them both to tuck deeper into their coats as they waited.

When the bus finally arrived, they climbed aboard. Ananya instinctively chose the window seat, tucking herself against the glass where the reflections of streetlights danced along the surface. Arjun slid in beside her, the closeness unavoidable but somehow different now, heavier after what had nearly happened by the lake.

The bus rumbled forward, its soft hum filling the quiet. Arjun leaned back, trying to steady his thoughts. He was satisfied, in a way—a quiet sense of contentment sat in his chest after the day they'd

shared. And yet, something unusual gnawed at him, a current of restlessness he couldn't quite name.

He glanced sideways at Ananya. She was watching the city roll past outside, her reflection flickering faintly against the glass, strands of her hair catching the glow of streetlights. She looked calm, lost in the moving scenery.

Arjun exhaled slowly, then slipped his phone out of his pocket. The screen lit up, its glow cutting against the dim bus interior. Notifications crowded the display—group messages from the guys, a couple of missed updates about classes, and one reminder about the upcoming major exam.

He scrolled absently, though his mind wasn't on the words. His thumb hovered, moving without focus, while his thoughts kept circling back to the bench by the lake, the brush of her shoulder, the suspended moment that had refused to leave him alone.

Outside, Birmingham blurred past in streaks of neon and streetlamp gold, the city alive in its Sunday evening rhythm. Inside the bus, though, everything between them felt suspended again—quiet, charged, and quietly pulling at Arjun in ways he hadn't expected.The bus hissed to a halt at the next stand. They stepped off, the cool

November air wrapping around them again. Arjun checked his phone—according to Google Maps, it was about a fifteen-minute walk from here.

"Not too far," he said, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

Ananya nodded, her eyes bright as they set off together. The streets around them pulsed with Saturday evening life—shoppers heading home with bags in hand, groups of friends laughing loudly, couples hurrying toward dinner reservations. The closer they walked, the more the skyline shifted, until a massive structure began to take shape.

The **Bullring & Grand Central** loomed ahead, its sweeping curves lit up in a mosaic of colors. The outer walls shimmered with metallic discs that caught the glow of the city lights, making the entire building appear almost alive. Arjun slowed his steps without realizing it, his eyes fixed on the sight.

He'd seen malls before in India, plenty of them—but nothing like this. The sheer scale of it, the way it seemed to rise and ripple against the night sky, made it feel like stepping into another world.

"Whoa," he muttered under his breath.

Ananya, walking beside him, was wide-eyed. When they reached **St. Martin's Square entrance**, she stopped for a moment, tilting her head back to take it all in. "This... this feels like heaven," she said, her voice almost a whisper.

Arjun chuckled, but even he couldn't deny it—the place was surreal. Together, they passed through the glass doors and stepped inside.

Warm light flooded over them immediately, accompanied by the steady hum of life. The mall was alive with people—families, shoppers with arms full of branded bags, groups of teenagers moving in packs. Escalators crisscrossed like glowing ribbons, leading to higher levels, each lined with countless stores whose bright signs spilled into the open atrium.

Ananya's face lit up with wonder. She moved ahead a few steps, turning in a slow circle as though she didn't know where to look first. "It's like every shop in the world is crammed into this one place."

Arjun smiled at her enthusiasm, tucking his hands into his jacket pockets as he followed. "Careful. If you try to explore everything, we'll be here until next week."

She laughed, the sound carrying above the low din of voices. "Then maybe that's not such a bad idea."

And with that, they began exploring—wandering past rows of glowing storefronts, pausing at displays, letting the buzz of the mall swallow them whole. For Arjun, the day already felt unusual, but standing here, watching her light up in awe, he had the oddest feeling that this was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Now after exploring the mall arjun was tired and demanded to head back and then they headed toward the bus stand.After that The ride back carried a stillness that neither of them commented on. Birmingham's streets slipped past outside, lamps glowing against the dimming evening sky. The bus was nearly empty, their voices echoing faintly in the hollow space. Ananya slid into the window seat, resting her cheek against the cool glass, while Arjun settled beside her. The hum of the engine and the faint rattle of the bus gave the whole moment an oddly intimate quiet.

"Let's play something," Ananya said suddenly, tilting her head toward him, her tone playful. "Truth or dare?"

Arjun let out a soft laugh, shaking his head. "Seriously? On a bus?"

"Why not? Come on," she insisted, her smile daring him.

"Alright then," he said finally, leaning back. "Truth."

Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "Tell me about the girl you like. Don't say her name. Just describe her."

Arjun paused, staring at the faint reflection of their faces in the window. His fingers tapped nervously on his phone before he tucked it away. "She's... someone who doesn't even realize how much space she takes in someone else's thoughts. She's warm, sometimes clumsy, but always genuine. When she walks into a room, it feels different. Lighter." His voice dropped, becoming quieter, as though speaking too loudly might give him away. "She makes the world seem less heavy."

Ananya blinked, her smile faltering for a fraction of a second before she covered it with a playful scoff. "Not bad. Sounds like a movie character." But inside, her heart thudded harder than she wanted to admit.

"My turn," she said quickly, trying to shake it off. "Truth."

Arjun turned toward her, eyes narrowing just slightly. "Tell me about your past love life."

She exhaled, gaze dropping to her hands. "Back in India, there's this boy. He's... waiting for me. Still believes that when I go back, things will work out between us." She gave a short, humorless laugh. "But I

don't feel anything for him. I never did. It was always one-sided. Sometimes I feel guilty... but you can't force love, right?"

Arjun didn't reply immediately, only nodded, his jaw tightening for reasons Ananya couldn't quite read.

Another round.

He chose truth again.

This time, Ananya didn't hesitate. Her voice was steady, but her eyes carried a spark of something deeper. "Tell me... how do you feel about me?"

The words hit harder than she expected—they seemed to suck the air out of the bus.

Arjun froze. His lips parted slightly, then pressed together. The warmth in his face drained away, leaving only tension in his shoulders and the hard set of his jaw. For a moment, she thought he might actually say something—something that would change everything.

But instead, he looked away, voice low and uneven. "Let's not play anymore."

It was so abrupt, so unlike him, that Ananya felt her chest tighten. She searched his profile for a clue—his eyes refusing to meet hers, his fingers clenched against his knee.

"Arjun?" she whispered, but he didn't answer.

The bus slowed, brakes hissing, and the driver called out the stop. Their stop.

Arjun stood quickly, forcing a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "We're here."

Ananya followed, her steps slower, her thoughts tangled. Outside, the cool night breeze swept against them, brushing strands of her hair across her face. The streets were quieter now, the glow of shop lights spilling across the pavement.

But her mind wasn't on the city. It was on the silence that stretched between them. On the way his expression had changed so suddenly, like he was holding back something too heavy to say.

She wanted to ask again, to push—but something in his closed-off demeanor told her not to. At least not tonight.

Arjun walked a step ahead, his hands shoved in his pockets, his eyes fixed forward. He was satisfied that he hadn't said too much—but

deep inside, the weight of unspoken words pressed against him, leaving a restless ache.

And behind him, Ananya walked in silence, wondering if she had just stumbled across the truth she wasn't ready for. The short walk from the bus stop to their building felt longer than it should have. The usual ease between them was replaced by something heavier, something neither could name aloud. The streets were hushed, only the faint hum of passing cars and the rustle of leaves filling the silence.

Ananya tried once or twice to start a conversation—mentioning how the lights on Broad Street always looked different at night, how Birmingham evenings carried a strange calm—but Arjun only responded with small nods or half-smiles. His thoughts were miles away, circling around the question she had asked, the one he hadn't dared to answer.

Finally, they reached the familiar outline of their building, its windows glowing faintly against the night sky. At the entrance, they slowed, both reluctant to break the moment yet unsure how to continue it.

"Thanks for today," Ananya said softly, her hand brushing the strap of her bag. "It was... nice."

Arjun forced a smile, though his eyes betrayed the storm within him. "Yeah. It was." His voice was steady, but thinner than usual, like he was holding something back.

For a second, their gazes met—her searching, his guarded. Then he looked away, pulling the door open for her. She stepped inside, the faint scent of the day's adventures still clinging to her hair, to her presence.

As they reached the lobby, Ananya turned toward the stairs. "Goodnight, Arjun."

"Goodnight," he replied, his tone even, almost too careful.

She lingered for a heartbeat, as if waiting for something more, before finally climbing the steps. Her footsteps echoed softly, fading until only silence remained.

Arjun stood there for a while, staring at the empty stairwell. His chest felt tight, as though words had been trapped there, clawing to get out. He exhaled slowly, slipping his hands into his pockets.

The night had given him everything he wanted—time with her, laughter, closeness—yet he walked away with a sense of unfinished truth. And as he headed toward his own apartment, one thought pressed at the back of his mind, stubborn and relentless:

Some truths can't be buried forever.

Chapter 8 – Sleepless Thoughts

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The late-November nights were colder now, the air carrying a sharp stillness that pressed against the windows of the residency. Inside his room, Arjun's desk lamp cast a pale circle of light over open notebooks and scattered pages. His pen scratched across the lines until the clock blinked **4:35 a.m.**

He hadn't slept. His eyes burned, his shoulders ached, but the problem wasn't the exam syllabus stacked in front of him. He had gone through tougher chapters before. This was different.

Since that bus ride, his mind hadn't felt steady. The way Ananya had spoken about her past—so calm, so detached—echoed in him. Their conversation had ended suddenly, and since then, a strange silence had stretched between them.

He leaned back, letting the pen drop, staring at the ceiling. The room was silent except for the faint hum of the heater, the world outside still wrapped in darkness. Everyone else was asleep— But sleep seemed far away from him.

Arjun wasn't sure what unsettled him more: the approaching exams or the unspoken words between him and Ananya. For the first time,

formulas and theories felt easier to solve than the thoughts running through his head. Arjun rubbed his temples, closing his notebook. *Maybe I should just sleep for a while,* he thought. His eyelids were heavy, and his body begged for rest.

But then, a slight chill brushed over him. He frowned, realizing the air felt different, colder than before. He pushed back his chair, walked to the window, and pulled the curtain aside.

Outside, the night had transformed. Soft flakes drifted from the sky, shimmering in the pale glow of the streetlights. The world was turning white, rooftops and trees already dusted in delicate layers of snow.

Arjun stood still, his tiredness momentarily forgotten. This was the first snowfall of the season. The silence of the night, the gentle fall of snow—it felt like time itself had slowed down.

A small, unexplainable smile touched his lips. For the first time in hours, his restless mind quieted.

Arjun moved on his instincts. He grabbed his jacket from the chair, pulled it over his tired shoulders, and slipped out of the room. The hallway was still, lit only by the faint glow of an emergency bulb. His

footsteps echoed softly as he descended the stairs and reached the ground floor.

The glass door creaked open, and a gust of freezing air rushed against his face. He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes for a moment. Snowflakes danced around him, settling gently on his hair and shoulders, melting as they touched his skin. For hours he had felt restless, but now, in the quiet embrace of the snowfall, something inside him loosened.

He stepped out, each stride crunching lightly on the fresh layer of snow. The streets were half-awake—dim streetlights glowed like distant beacons, and a few early joggers passed by, their shoes leaving quick patterns on the whitened pavement. Their breaths puffed clouds into the air, steady and rhythmic. To them it was just another morning. To Arjun, it felt like stepping into a new world.

Within minutes, he reached the small neighborhood park. The iron gates stood open, and the pathways were dusted in white. The swings hung still, their seats coated with snow, and the benches shimmered faintly under the lamplight. Arjun brushed snow off a bench and sat down.

He pulled out his phone, the glow of the screen sharp against the dim surroundings. His thumb flicked absently through reels—clips of music, comedy, random faces he didn't know. He chuckled faintly at one, but the laughter slipped away as quickly as it came. The park was too quiet, the moment too still for mindless noise.

He leaned back on the bench, letting the phone drop to his lap. A long, forceful exhalation escaped him, forming a cloud that floated upward, dissolving into the pale-grey sky. His eyes lingered on the falling snow.

For the first time in days, Arjun wasn't thinking about exams or unfinished conversations. He was just... breathing, watching, feeling. The world around him seemed softer, calmer, as if the snow had buried all the noise for a little while. Minutes slipped into an hour. His breath came in long clouds, and his shoes were dusted white. Yet he stayed there, still, as though the cold itself was keeping him awake and alive.

Every so often, he tilted his head back, watching the sky slowly shift from black to a pale shade of blue. Dawn was stretching over Birmingham, and the city was beginning to stir. But Arjun didn't care about time. For once, he wasn't measuring hours by chapters read or problems solved. He was simply... present.

By the time the clock neared six, the horizon had begun to soften with streaks of pale orange and gold. The snow glowed faintly under the rising light, and the park no longer felt like a secret world—it was becoming part of the city's waking day.

Arjun fatigue pulling at his body. The hours of study, the sleepless night, all of it weighed on him now. He rubbed his hands together, blowing into them for warmth, but his mind was already drifting elsewhere.

Somewhere in his heart, a quiet decision took shape. He needed a break. Just one day to step away from the books, the noise of deadlines, and the pressure building inside him. A leave... yes, maybe that's what I need.

The thought settled him more than any formula or plan had in days. He stood up slowly, brushing the snow off his jacket, and began walking back toward the residency as the sun finally broke over the horizon. Arjun pushed the glass door open, the warmth of the residency spilling over him like a sudden wave. His shoes left faint, wet tracks across the polished floor, snow melting into droplets behind him. Although he made his way to his house and then.The faint scent of coffee hung in the air, and the soft drone of the television filled the otherwise quiet morning.

In the living room, Logan was curled on the couch, a blanket draped over his shoulders, eyes fixed on the large screen. The weather forecast flashed with swirling clouds and shifting maps of the U.K. Logan's brows furrowed, and he glanced up just in time to see Arjun slip inside.

"Where were you at this hour?" Logan asked, his tone carrying equal parts curiosity and disbelief. "You never wake up early."

Arjun pulled off his jacket, brushing at the snow clinging to it. His face was pale, eyes heavy with exhaustion, but there was a small calmness in his voice.
"I didn't wake up early," he murmured. "Didn't sleep at all."

Logan tilted his head, studying him. He wanted to ask more—what had kept him awake, why he looked like he had walked through half the city—but something in Arjun's expression stopped him. Instead, Logan just gave a faint shrug and returned his gaze to the forecast.

The announcer's voice rang out, firm and precise: "...temperatures will continue to drop, and by evening, a snowstorm is expected to hit Birmingham. Residents are advised to stay indoors..."

Arjun paused on his way to the stairs, glancing briefly at the screen. For a moment, he stood there, watching the map painted in shades

of blue and white, the storm icons swirling closer. He felt a strange echo inside him—like the storm outside was reflecting the turbulence within, the thoughts he couldn't quite name.

He didn't linger long. His body ached for rest. With slow steps, he climbed to his room and let himself fall onto the bed. The sheets were cold at first, but they wrapped around him with a comforting weight.

Outside, the sun had risen fully, turning the rooftops into sheets of glittering white. The morning was bright, deceptively calm. Yet in the background, the forecast repeated—warning of what was to come.

As his eyes finally drifted shut, one thought lingered with him: the storm is coming.

Arjun was almost asleep, his body sinking into the mattress, when the faint buzz of his phone vibrated against the nightstand. He groaned softly, reaching out with half-closed eyes, intending to silence it.

But the buzzing didn't stop. It came again, and again—message after message. Finally, with a tired swipe, he unlocked the screen.

It was Vedant.

"BROOO WAKE UP!!!"
"BIG NEWS."
"Exam shifted to next Saturday!!!"
"Whole week holiday declared!!"

Arjun blinked at the screen, his exhaustion warring with the sudden rush of relief. The exam—the one he had been burning nights over—was pushed back. A whole week's break.

He lay there for a moment, staring at the glowing screen, letting the news sink in. The corners of his lips twitched into the faintest smile. For once, he didn't have to force his mind to rest. The pressure that had been pressing on his chest all night loosened, and the timing felt almost unreal—like the world had given him permission to finally breathe.

The phone slipped from his fingers onto the bed. This time, when he closed his eyes, sleep came easily.

Outside, the sun brightened against the white rooftops. But somewhere on the horizon, clouds were already gathering—bringing with them the storm that had been promised.

Arjun woke with a heaviness pressing against his skull, the kind that came from broken sleep and restless thoughts. His body was stiff, weighed down as if the mattress had absorbed his strength. With effort, he turned toward the clock on the side table—its red digits blinked mercilessly. **3:00 p.m.**

His brows knitted together. *Three already?* He had slept the day away.

But what unsettled him more wasn't the time—it was the world beyond his window. Though it was mid-afternoon, the view outside was cloaked in a dusky gray, as though the sun itself had retreated. The storm had passed, but its aftermath hung heavy. Snow layered the streets in uneven sheets, rooftops sagged under its weight, and the silence that followed was eerie, broken only by the faint groan of wind against glass.

Dragging himself up, Arjun shuffled to the hallway. The chill of the floor seeped through his socks. When he stepped into the living room, he found Logan on the couch, hunched forward, elbows on knees. His cousin's posture was taut, his gaze flickering between the muted weather forecast on the TV and the front door, as though caught between waiting and worrying.

The moment Logan spotted him, he straightened sharply, tension etched across his features.

"Arjun," he said quickly, almost breathless. "Is Ananya... your good friend?"

Arjun blinked, caught off guard. The question landed heavier than expected. "...Yes," he answered after a pause, his voice clipped, betraying more emotion than he intended.

Logan's jaw tightened. He leaned forward, voice low and serious now. "Then you need to see her. She's injured."

Arjun's chest tightened, a chill racing through him that had nothing to do with the snow outside. "Injured? How bad?"

Logan hesitated for a fraction of a second, then forced the words out. "She was unconscious. For two hours. Head injury."

The sentence struck like a blow. For a moment, Arjun felt as though the floor had tilted beneath him. His heart kicked against his ribs, breath catching in his throat. The walls seemed to close in, air thinning.

Without a second thought, he spun on his heel, every nerve sparking with urgency. His footsteps thundered down the stairwell, two steps

at a time, his hand barely grazing the rail. He shoved through the lobby doors, the sudden rush of cold air hitting his face like a slap.

Outside, the snow crunched sharply beneath his shoes, the ground slick and treacherous. He sprinted across the frozen street, his breath a ragged cloud in the frigid air. The city felt strange—streets deserted, cars buried beneath snow, the silence of winter broken only by the pounding of his own heartbeat.

Then it happened. His foot struck a patch of black ice hidden beneath a dusting of snow. In a split second, balance deserted him. His body lurched sideways, gravity dragging him down.

He hit the ground hard, the icy crust stabbing through his clothes. A grunt tore from his throat, his breath stolen by the cold shock. For a moment, the world spun—the gray sky overhead, the snow biting his palms, the sting radiating through his ribs.

But he didn't let himself linger. His teeth clenched, his muscles strained against the cold as he pushed himself upright. Snow clung to his jacket, his hands stung, but none of it mattered. His mind was a single, burning thread pulling him forward.

Ananya.

That name alone carried him back to his feet.

Arjun staggered back to his feet, brushing the sting of snow from his palms. His breath misted heavily in the air as he started forward again, each step powered by nothing but the thought of Ananya.

"Arjun?"

The voice cut through the cold, pulling his head up. Emily was standing a few feet away, bundled in a long coat, her boots crunching against the snow. Her eyes widened at the sight of him, his frantic pace, his disheveled look.

"Where are you rushing like this?" she asked, concern lacing her tone.

"Ananya," he blurted, chest rising and falling with uneven breaths. "Logan told me—she's hurt. I need to see her."

Emily's expression softened with recognition. "She was here a little while ago... before the storm got worse." She hesitated, as if weighing something, then nodded. "You're going to her, right?"

"Yes," Arjun said quickly, already turning away. "I should go now—"

"Wrong way," Emily interrupted, her voice firm but kind.

Arjun froze mid-step, his heart skipping. He realized with a rush of embarrassment and panic—he had never actually been to Ananya's place before.

Emily gave a small, understanding smile, then tilted her head toward the opposite building. "She's in the building to the right. Room 105. First floor."

Relief surged through him, but the urgency didn't let him linger. "Thanks," he said breathlessly, and without waiting another second, he pivoted and dashed toward the right building, snow spraying beneath his feet.

Arjun stepped up to the building, the snow crunching beneath his shoes, and reached out toward the entrance. The glass doors slid open automatically with a soft whoosh, revealing the warm, dimly lit lobby. The contrast from the cold outside made him take a steadying breath as he leaned for a moment against the smooth metal frame beside the doors.

The hum of the automatic doors closing behind him was the only sound in the empty lobby. He pressed the lift button, and as the elevator arrived with a quiet chime, he stepped inside without hesitation. The metal walls reflected his tense expression, and he

pressed the button for the first floor, exhaling quietly. Each second in the lift stretched endlessly as his mind raced.

When the doors slid open at the first floor, he stepped out onto the corridor, eyes scanning quickly. The soft, flickering lights overhead created elongated shadows along the walls. At the far end, in the corner of the lobby, **room 105** came into view.

Arjun paused, resting his shoulder lightly against the wall, trying to steady his heartbeat. Thoughts of Ananya's parents and their likely reactions swirled in his mind. *Will they be angry? Should I even be here? And her... what will she think of me barging in like this?*

He shook his head slightly, brushing aside the thoughts, and reached out to ring the bell. The chime echoed softly down the corridor, making him flinch slightly.

The door slid open automatically with a soft hiss, revealing a girl about Logan's age. Her hair was tied back neatly, her expression cautious. "Who?" she asked, her tone polite but guarded.

Arjun straightened, forcing calm into his voice. "I'm a friend of Ananya's," he replied, the words almost rushing out. "I... I heard she got hurt. Is she okay?"

The girl's expression softened, and she nodded. "Yeah, she's fine now. Nothing serious."

Arjun hesitated, his chest tightening. The tension in his shoulders didn't ease; the urgency of the morning still burned inside him.

"...Can I... see her?" he asked, voice low and careful, almost pleading.

The girl's lips curved faintly into a small smile, and she stepped aside. " She's inside. Be gentle—she's still recovering." "I'm Mina," she said gently. "Ananya's older sister."

Arjun blinked, processing the name. "Oh... Mina. Okay," he murmured. Then, almost instinctively, he asked, "And... uncle and aunt? I mean... your parents—are they...?"

Mina's expression shifted suddenly, her mouth tightening. She looked down for a moment, silent. When she finally spoke, her words came slowly, almost carefully.
"They don't live here," she said, her voice strange, as if the answer carried a weight Arjun couldn't yet comprehend.

"Oh... so they live in India?" Arjun asked cautiously, trying to piece together the puzzle.

"No," Mina replied, her eyes flicking briefly toward the floor.

Arjun froze. A strange unease coiled in his stomach. Something felt off, though he couldn't immediately place it. His voice dropped, tentative. "Then... where are they?"

Mina drew in a deep breath, her voice soft but steady. "They... are no more."

Arjun felt the words hit him like a physical blow. The warmth drained from his chest, replaced by a cold, heavy weight. His mind stuttered, unable to process the truth.

"They... died in a car accident in India, three years ago," Mina continued, her eyes never leaving his. "It was sudden. Because of it... Ananya was deeply traumatized. Her father's brother sent us here, to Birmingham, so she could continue her studies and... try to heal. Her mind was diverted by school, new surroundings... anything to help her move on."

Arjun's thoughts swirled. His chest felt tight, his heartbeat loud in the quiet hallway. *Three years... and she never told me?*The thought burned inside him. *Why didn't she ever share this? Why did she carry it alone?*

He sank slightly against the doorframe, his mind drowning in the sudden weight of everything he had just learned. The snow, the

storm, the urgency of the morning—all of it seemed to fade as he tried to comprehend Ananya's hidden past.

Questions, sorrow, and confusion tangled together inside him. And for the first time, he realized just how much she had been through—and how little anyone, even him, truly knew.